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## **MASTERS OF MILITARY STUDIES**

### ***The Raid on Trenton***

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OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR A DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

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The Raid on Trenton

Command and Staff College 2002

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

**Title:** The Raid on Trenton

**Author:** Major James D. Christmas, United States Marine Corps

**Thesis:** For the purpose of this paper, I will not use traditional methods used by history books when they have attempted to unlock the mysteries of the Battle of Trenton on 26 December 1776. Instead I will attempt to put this battle in perspective and analyze it for what it really was. I will analyze the actions of 26 December as a raid operation and uncover its success using McRaven's model of Relative Superiority and tie it to principles of raid operations. I will introduce this model, define it and the principles of raid operations and then proceed in bringing to light the specific reasons and key factors of the raid's success and the intricacies, which made the 26 December raid on Trenton successful.

**Discussion:** There are six principles of raid operations that are used to assist in the analysis of the Trenton raid. The six principles are part of McRaven's model and are composed of simplicity, security, repetition, surprise, speed and purpose. These principles have been a part of every successful raid operation and play a vital role in each of their analyses. It is from these principles that a force is able to achieve relative superiority. The principles must be part of each phase of the raid operation. They must be found in the planning, preparation and execution of a raid if a failure of some sort is to be avoided. Each principle is intertwined with the other to produce synergy.

The principles of Special (Raid) Operations and the relative superiority graph provided in McRaven's Model provide the foundation for analyzing any raid conducted in the past or future. It allows a raid to be dissected and analyzed according to raid specific criteria. It will be this model that is used in the analysis of the raid on Trenton. The principles of Special (Raid) Operations and the relative superiority graph provide the foundation for analyzing any raid conducted in the past or future. It allows a raid to be dissected and analyzed according to raid specific criteria.

Prior to the raid on Trenton there was a shortage of food, shoes, stockings, coats and shirts. Disease was running out of control throughout the army and six of every ten men were incapable of fighting. To complicate matters, enlistments were running out at the cyclic rate with the soldiers choosing to return home. Washington's Army was losing faith. The winter weather of the year 1776 was one of the worst in recent times for Washington's Army. As the days became shorter and the nights longer, Washington's Army was in the survival mode. Washington was in desperate need of a moral boost for his men. If he did not accept the risk of conducting the raid, it is quite possible the struggle for independence would have been over.

This assumption of risk led to the raid on Trenton, which became the first victory the Continental Army had achieved in the Revolutionary War and possibly the most important raid ever conducted in history. The raid on Trenton boosted America towards independence by giving the revolution hope and by providing a spirit of victory that we still hold today. The raid successfully used all the principles of raid operations and is worthy of study by raid forces today.

**Conclusion:** The raid on Trenton is a perfect example of a TEXTBOOK raid. Relative Superiority was achieved within minutes of the first shots fired in Trenton due to the proper application of the raid principles. It was a small force with a simple plan that maintained security. Although not thoroughly rehearsed, the plan was imbedded in all the raid forces minds. The operation was executed with surprise, speed and a purpose of independence. The Hessian forces in and around Trenton were penetrated before they had time to react and mass and relative superiority was sustained through the use of combined arms, bayonets, and supreme dedication. The principles used correctly minimized the frictions of war. Other frictions of war encountered during execution were eliminated throughout the battle by the moral factors of courage and boldness.

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## INTRODUCTION

When evaluating or analyzing history and decisive battles, one must decide how he will approach it. There are many models and examples available of different ways in which to dissect an event or events in history to prove a point or determine why decisions were made. For the purpose of this paper, I will not use traditional methods used by history books when they have attempted to unlock the mysteries of the Battle of Trenton on 26 December 1776. Instead I will attempt to put this battle in perspective and analyze it for what it really was. I will analyze the actions of 26 December as a raid operation and uncover its success using McRaven's model<sup>1</sup> of Relative Superiority and tie it to principles of raid operations. I will introduce this model, define it and the principles of raid operations and then proceed in bringing to light the specific reasons and key factors of the raid's success and the intricacies, which made the 26 December raid on Trenton successful.

## SCOPE OF PAPER

To begin this paper we must first define what a raid operation is. A raid operation according to Marine Corps doctrine is:

Is an operation, usually small scale, involving a swift penetration of hostile territory to secure information, confuse the enemy, or to destroy installations. It ends with a planned withdrawal upon completion of the assigned mission. Raids may be conducted as separate operations or in support of other operations.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> William H. McRaven while at Naval Postgraduate School wrote his thesis on the Theory of Special Operations. In his Thesis, McRaven developed the Theory of Special Operations and a relative superiority graph and special operations model that I will use as my McRaven's Model throughout this paper. McRaven thoroughly analyzed 8 raid operations for his thesis and put them against his model. His model is a proven one in the analysis of raid operations. Although it is not well known by historians, I have found it to be the perfect match for analyzing the Battle of Trenton for what it is: a raid.

<sup>2</sup> FMRP 7-32 Raid operations. Chapter 1

This definition allows us to study the 26 December 1776 actions as it is defined, a raid. It allows us to analyze the actions taken during the preparation, crossing, assault and withdrawal. Using McRaven's model will allow us to see why a seemingly inferior force is able to defeat a professional force in fortified positions. This theory of relative superiority goes against Carl von Clausewitz's statement:

The defensive form of warfare is intrinsically stronger than the offense.<sup>3</sup> [It] contributes resisting power, the ability to preserve and protect oneself. Thus, the defense generally has a negative aim, that of resisting the enemy's will...if we are to mount an offensive to impose our will, we must develop enough force to overcome the inherent superiority of the enemy's defense.<sup>4</sup>

This disadvantage of attacking the stronger form of warfare can be overcome if we understand the principles of raid operations and in particular the Theory of Relative Superiority.

## **RELATIVE SUPERIORITY**

Relative Superiority defined by McRaven is, "a condition that exists when an attacking force, generally smaller, gains a decisive advantage over a larger or well defended enemy."<sup>5</sup> He goes on to state that, "once relative superiority is achieved, the attacking force is no longer at a disadvantage and has the initiative to exploit the enemy's weaknesses and secure victory."<sup>6</sup>

Relative superiority is a concept crucial to raid operations. It gives us the ability to illustrate the positive forces that influence the success of a mission, and equally, to show how the friction's of war affect the attainment of the objective. Relative superiority is defined by three basic properties that are

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<sup>3</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, On War. (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1976), 358.

<sup>4</sup> FMFM 1

<sup>5</sup> William H. McRaven, Lieutenant Commander, USN, The Theory of Special Operations Thesis. (Monterey, CA: Naval Post Graduate School, 1993), 2.

<sup>6</sup> McRaven, 2.

revealed in combat. It is these basic properties that must be understood prior to analyzing the raid on Trenton.

The first property of relative superiority is that it is the pivotal movement in an engagement. It is frequently achieved at the point of greatest risk. When defenses are placed around a vital point, the closer a penetrating force gets, the tougher the defenses become and the harder the penetration becomes. If the attacker has the ability and penetrates the last obstacle, then the probability of success increases and strongly outweighs the defenders ability to defend successfully. When this happens, relative superiority has been achieved.<sup>7</sup>

The second property of relative superiority is sustainment. It is not enough to achieve relative superiority, it must be sustained in order to guarantee victory. It frequently requires the outside forces of courage, intellect, boldness and perseverance. These moral factors either individually or combined will allow the weaker force to maintain relative superiority long enough to succeed in their mission.<sup>8</sup>

The final property of relative superiority is that if lost, it is difficult to regain. The loss of relative superiority causes the loss of initiative, allowing the defense to re-establish its strength and prevail.<sup>9</sup>

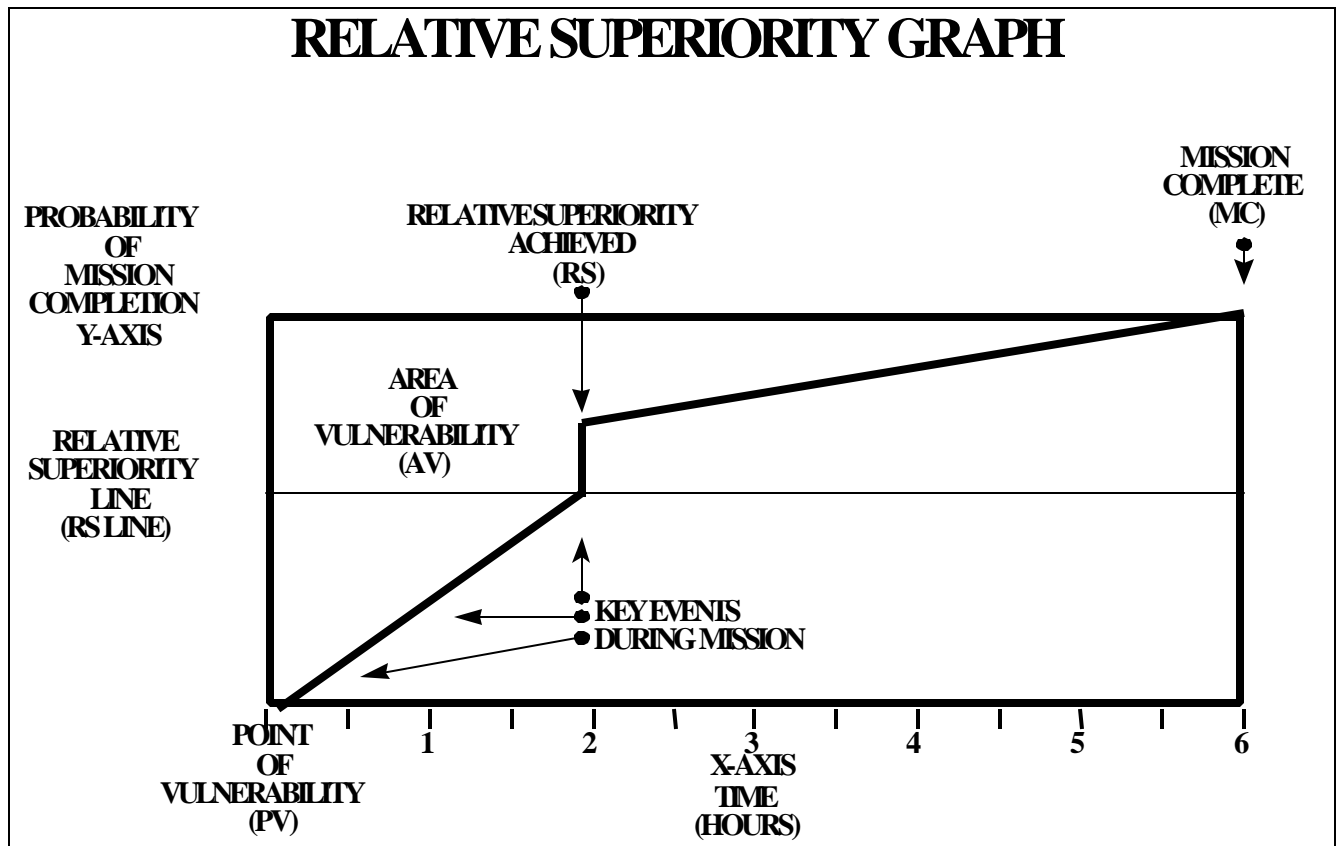
The key to any successful raid operation is to gain and maintain relative superiority. The longer the raid takes the more likely the enemy will be able to overcome beyond the initial intervention of will, chance and uncertainty. During the raid on Trenton, the concept of relative superiority will be shown using McCraven's relative superiority graph. The graph (Figure 1-1) illustrates how McCraven's Model is affected by the positive and negative factors of conflict. It will demonstrate the three properties in relation to the Trenton raid and provide a visual image of the event.

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<sup>7</sup> McCraven, 6.

<sup>8</sup> McCraven, 7.

<sup>9</sup> McCraven, 8.



**Figure 1-1. Sample Relative Superiority Graph.**

The X-axis is Time, the Y-axis is Probability of Mission Completion. The intersection of the axis is the Point of Vulnerability (PV). The Point of Vulnerability is defined, as the point in a mission when the attacking force reaches the enemy's first line of defenses. At this point, the frictions of war (chance, uncertainty and the will of the enemy) will begin to impinge upon the success of the engagement. Much like the culminating point, the Point of Vulnerability is somewhat arbitrary, and the exact location can be debated.<sup>10</sup>

The Area of Vulnerability (AV) is a function of mission completion over time. The longer it takes to reach relative superiority, the greater the Area of Vulnerability will be; hence, the greater the impact of

<sup>10</sup> McRaven, 10. Taken almost directly from text for accuracy.



the friction's of war. The graph also shows the critical events leading up to relative superiority and when the mission completed.<sup>11</sup>

This theory of relative superiority can be combined with the principles of raid operations that effect relative superiority to give us a model from which to analyze the raid on Trenton.

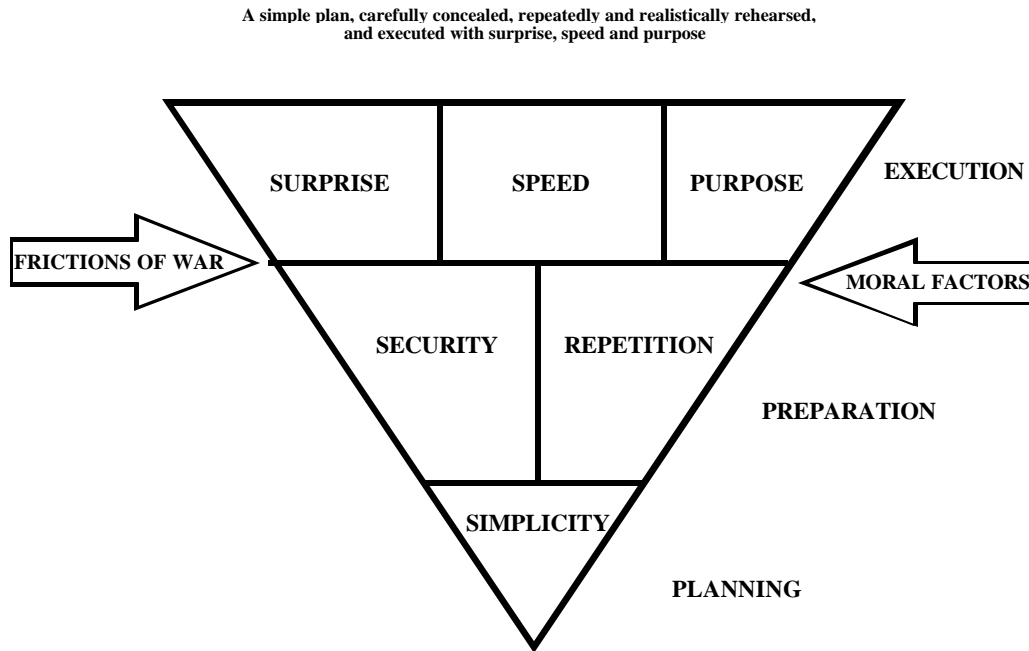
## **PRINCIPLES OF RAID OPERATIONS**

There are six principles of raid operations that will be used to assist in the analysis of the Trenton raid. The six principles are part of McRaven's model and are composed of simplicity, security, repetition, surprise, speed and purpose.<sup>12</sup> These principles have been a part of every successful raid operation and play a vital role in each of their analyses. It is from these principles that a force is able to achieve relative superiority. The principles must be part of each phase of the raid operation. They must be found in the planning, preparation and execution of a raid if a failure of some sort is to be avoided. Each principle is intertwined with the other to produce synergy. McRaven depicts the principles of raid operations as an inverted pyramid shown in Figure 1-2.

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<sup>11</sup> McRaven, 11. Taken almost directly from text for accuracy.

<sup>12</sup> The six principles of raid operations for the purpose of this paper will be from McRaven's model. McRaven refers to them as principles of Special Operations, but for the purpose of this paper they can be used for raid operations in which forces may be larger than in certain Special Operations. These principles can also be found within Marine Corps Doctrine. The principles in Marine Corps Doctrine are a bit different, but do contain much of the same concepts. Using McRaven's principles will still allow the analysis of the raid within Marine Corps Doctrine.



**Figure 1-2. McRaven's Principles of Raid operations**

The blocks within the inverted pyramid can be “constructed” to achieve relative superiority. The success of the raid operation must be evenly balanced on a slight apex as the inverted pyramid. It requires courage, intellect, boldness, and perseverance which contribute to the moral factors of war to counterbalance the frictions of war which might cause the pyramid to crash and thus cause the defeat of the raid force. This model will help illuminate the relationship between the principles of raid operations and relative superiority of the Trenton raid. The model shows that when an inferior force is able to gain relative superiority through effective use of the principles, they are able to succeed. Failure comes when the moral factors are overmatched by the frictions of war and the pyramid can not be kept in balance. In order to understand these principles, we must first define what each encompasses.<sup>13</sup>

## SIMPLICITY

Simplicity is the most crucial principle in the success of a raid operation. The more complicated the plan, the greater potential for failure. There are three elements that contribute to simplicity: limiting the number of objectives, good intelligence, and innovation.<sup>14</sup>

Limiting the number of objectives is essential to a successful raid. These objectives must be clearly defined and the plan for seizing them must be simple and as detailed as possible. As objectives increase and the need for more complicated plans arise, the risk of failure also increases. Therefore, it is imperative we choose limited objectives, and provide a detailed yet simple plan.<sup>15</sup>

The second element in simplicity is intelligence. Good intelligence will assist in simplifying a plan by reducing the “unknowns” of conflict. Good intelligence will not provide all information needed, but it will provide enough to develop a simple and detailed plan for the raid. It will still be the commander’s responsibility to decipher the information and make sound judgment decisions.<sup>16</sup>

Innovation, the third element of simplicity, assists in balancing a plan by eliminating friction that might cause a force to be compromised. It also may allow a force the ability to gain and maintain relative superiority. Innovation is often found through technology and is manifested itself in new and unconventional tactics.<sup>17</sup>

The elements of simplicity will normally have their greatest impact during the execution phase. They all, however, must be identified during planning and throughout the preparation for the raid to enable the success of the force.

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<sup>13</sup> McRaven, 17.

<sup>14</sup> McRaven, 17.

<sup>15</sup> McRaven, 18.

<sup>16</sup> McRaven, 19.

<sup>17</sup> McRaven, 20.

## **SECURITY**

Security is imperative if a raid operation is to be successful. Proper security allows a force to remain undetected throughout planning, preparation, and execution. It keeps the enemy from gaining an unfair advantage of the raid that has been planned. It must be expected that the enemy will be in fortified defensive positions prepared for an attack. For this reason, the attacking force must try and accomplish concealing the time, method, and purpose of the raid operation. The attacking force can succeed in spite of fortified positions, if the enemy does not know how the attacker will conduct the raid. Security allows the raid force the advantage and is a stepping stone to achieving relative superiority, if it prevents the enemy from planning for a direct assault where he knows the time, method, and purpose of the raid. The enemy's advance warning would greatly inhibit the raid force the ability to accomplish its mission by possibly negating relative superiority.<sup>18</sup>

## **REPETITION**

Rehearsals make up a significant part of repetition. Rehearsals allow the raid force to validate plans and correct any difficulties that might be encountered during the execution phase of a raid.<sup>19</sup> Rehearsals can be implemented at all levels and be as thorough as a full dress rehearsal, to a back brief by subordinate commanders. The rehearsals type chosen will be a function of time and familiarity with the tactics involved or action required. It is the repetition of the rehearsals and plans that will allow a force to be successful in eliminating the frictions of war. Usually a mission that has failed during a rehearsal and not corrected, has failed during execution. Repetition allows the raid force's skills to increase over

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<sup>18</sup> McRaven, 22.

<sup>19</sup> FMFM 7-32, 1-17.

time. This repetition may come from rehearsals prior to the raid or over time when faced with combat day to day.<sup>20</sup>

## **SURPRISE**

Raid forces will usually attack a fortified position where the enemy is prepared for an attack of some kind. The raid forces will rely heavily on surprise to achieve relative superiority and catch the enemy in a less than prepared situation. Raid operations rely on the use of timing, deception, and the enemy's vulnerabilities in gaining surprise.<sup>21</sup>

Timing is a key factor in gaining surprise. Most raid operations are conducted at night to catch the enemy off guard. The use of the night provides the raid force with cover and concealment. It is at night when most unsuspecting forces are at their lowest security posture. The low security posture allows the raid force the ability to maintain security and achieve surprise. On the other hand, the night can also cause an enemy force to be at a higher state of readiness if an impending attack is likely. It is the commander who must ultimately decide when to attack after his mission analysis. He must decide when the enemy will be least prepared for the raid that is being planned.<sup>22</sup>

Deception can be used in gaining surprise by either diverting the enemy's focus elsewhere or delaying the enemy's ability to react to the impending assault. Deception can be crucial in a raid force's ability to gain relative superiority through the element of surprise if planned and executed correctly. It can also cause a raid operation to be compromised if planned and conducted poorly. If planned and

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<sup>20</sup> McRaven, 25.

<sup>21</sup> McRaven, 27.

<sup>22</sup> McRaven, 28.

conducted poorly, the deception could alert the enemy of an impending attack. It might allow reinforcements the ability to reinforce the objective prior to, or while, the raid force is on the objective.<sup>23</sup>

Surprise gives the raid force one of the elements of McRaven's pyramid in its quest to achieve relative superiority. It acts as a force multiplier, but is not a stand alone principle. Surprise must be combined with all the other principles if a force is to be successful.<sup>24</sup>

### **SPEED**

Speed can dramatically increase a raid forces chances at achieving relative superiority by getting to an objective prior to the enemy reacting. Delays, which may be caused by the enemy, will expand the Area of Vulnerability in McRaven's relative superiority graph and decrease the chances of mission success. If a raid force is unable to arrive in the objective area prior to being discovered, then the frictions of war will begin to play a large role in the success of the raid. It is imperative that the raid force causes the enemy to react even if discovered, and complete their mission as soon as possible. Speed, as a function of time, will help to enable a force to gain and maintain relative superiority even if detected by the enemy. Speed allows the raid force the ability to make the enemy react to it vice the raid force reacting to the enemy.<sup>25</sup>

### **PURPOSE**

Purpose of conducting a raid operation is the understanding of why we are conducting this mission. It gives all those involved with conducting the mission a sense of being. It allows the commander to stress the importance of the mission and what it will accomplish if successful. It provides every member of the raid force the ability to make sound decisions in support of the mission without receiving any

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<sup>23</sup> McRaven, 27.

<sup>24</sup> McRaven, 30.

<sup>25</sup> McRaven, 30-32.

further guidance once the raid is being executed. Purpose should not be mistaken with moral factors. The purpose is planned for in great detail and may have effects on the moral factors, but is not one of them. Moral factors will often be seen when a raid force is in pursuit of achieving their purpose and one or more of the moral factors are required in their quest.<sup>26</sup>

The principles of Special (Raid) Operations and the relative superiority graph provided in the McRaven Model above provide the foundation for analyzing any raid conducted in the past or future. It allows a raid to be dissected and analyzed according to raid specific criteria. It will be this model that will be used in the analysis of the raid on Trenton.<sup>27</sup>

## **WHY TRENTON?**

The purpose of choosing the 26 December 1776, attack on Trenton was to analyze the battle for what it was. The battle for Trenton fit the definition of a raid and was not thoroughly analyzed as one by historians that I could find. The battle for Trenton during the Revolutionary war has been on many Hallmark cards and in many a painting, as General Washington crossed the Delaware River. The battle turned the war and warranted study for its applications in raid operations. William McRaven studied many raids in his development of his model. He studied smaller scale raids from many nations. He didn't use any raid operations from the Revolutionary period for his model, and with the implications of Trenton on our sovereignty as a nation; I felt it warranted a detailed look.

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<sup>26</sup> McRaven, 34.

<sup>27</sup> It is important that the reader fully understand what I call McRaven's Model and its application in analyzing raid operations. McRaven's Model consist of the principles of Special Operations, which I call principles of raid operations, the Special Operations Model, and the relative superiority graph. These together allow the reader to understand the foundation that the raid on Trenton was analyzed. It also gives the reader the understanding of the products used for articulation of the success of the raid and what definitions were used in evaluation of the principles during the raid.

I will use McRaven's Model as the foundation in my analysis of the raid on Trenton. The analysis will begin with the background leading up to the raid on Trenton and a description of the area of operations. Identifying the forces and leaders involved and then a description of what took place on 26 December 1776 will follow it. Upon completion of the description of the raid, I will analyze the raid according to McRaven's Model to uncover the principles, which made the raid successful and where they fell short. The conclusion will provide the insight to its study by Marine Corps forces in raid application today.

## **WASHINGTON'S REVOLUTIONARY RAID ON TRENTON**

**26 DECEMBER 1776**

### **BACKGROUND**

During the period of the Revolutionary War, there was specific ways in which armies fought battles. Battles were normally conducted in linear formations. These linear formations were seen during the on 16 November 1776 at Fort Washington and on 20 November 1776 at Fort Lee where General Washington's Army had suffered devastating defeats in casualties and morale. Washington's original Army of 21,000 had been reduced to 4,000 men during their three months of fighting the British Army and their eventual retreat across the Delaware River to Pennsylvania would bring with it a new strategy from Washington. This strategy would be one of a protracted war. Washington would now fight on his terms in the places of his choosing.

General Washington understood that in America, times were changing and clashes with the Indians had taught the revolutionaries that linear warfare might not be the best way to fight a war. The key to



the success of a smaller force is to use hit and run tactics, ambushes and the night to the attacker's advantage. This thought manifested itself in the Revolutionary War where the colonialist were outnumbered and outgunned. It became a period of transition that the colonialist grasped this new style of fighting and incorporated it into their war plans. This transition proved to be substantial in the colonial raid on Trenton and the ultimate quest for independence.<sup>28</sup>

This ultimate quest for independence was in doubt in early December 1776. "The American Crisis"<sup>29</sup> was at hand and the feelings at the time are best described by Thomas Paine when he wrote:

These are the times that try men's souls: The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of his country; but he who stands by it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman. Tyranny like hell, is not easily conquered; yet we have this consolation with us, that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph. What we obtain too cheap, we esteem too lightly: 'Tis dearness only that gives everything its value. Heaven knows how to put a proper price upon its goods; and it would be strange indeed if so celestial an article as FREEDOM should not be highly rated.<sup>30</sup>

Washington's Army withdrawal through the mud, rain and miserable conditions took its toll on Washington's men and equipment.<sup>31</sup> There was a shortage of food, shoes, stockings, coats and shirts. Disease was running out of control throughout the Army and six of every ten men were incapable of fighting.<sup>32</sup> To complicate matters, enlistments were running out at the cyclic rate during December with the soldiers choosing to return home. Washington's Army was losing faith.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Don Higginbotham, The War for Independence, Military Attitudes, Policies, and Practice, 1763-1789, (New York: Macmillan Ltd., 1971), 4.

<sup>29</sup> Thomas Paine, The Essential Thomas Paine. Edited by Sidney Hook. (New York, NY: New American Library, New York, 1969), 75.

<sup>30</sup> Paine, 75.

<sup>31</sup> Robert Powell, Lieutenant Colonel, USMA, "Victory or Death." Washington's Delaware Crossing---Christmas 1776 and the Battle of Trenton Research Paper. (Carlisle, PA: US Army War College, 1984), 1-4.

<sup>32</sup> Howard Fast, The Crossing, (New York, NY: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1971), 97.

<sup>33</sup> Powell, 3.

On the other side of the river, General Howe chose not to pursue Washington's bewildered Army across the Delaware River. Instead, he chose to establish posts throughout New Jersey and, as per the customs of warfare at that time, use winter as a break in fighting. A portion of force his was placed in Trenton for the winter and General Howe assigned the task of establishing the outpost to the Hessian German mercenaries. This outpost was under the command of Colonel Johann Rall and numbered 1586 men. Other outposts of note was the Hessian outpost of Bordentown which numbered 1500 men and was six miles away and the Princeton outpost of British regular forces which numbered 3000 men and was 12 miles away in supporting distance.<sup>34</sup>



<sup>34</sup> Powell, 3-4.

The winter weather of the year 1776 was one of the worst in recent times for Washington's Army. As the days became shorter and the nights longer, Washington's Army was in the survival mode. Ice formed on the Delaware River and the snow began to accumulate. Washington in need of a moral boost for his men desperately awaited the arrival and link-up of General Sullivan and his 2000 men.<sup>35</sup>

General Washington had sent a messenger prior to General Sullivan's arrival that all officer's and men were to be pressed clean. Boots were to be blackened, swords and bayonets shined and fixed, rifles cleaned and clothing stitched. The unit would march and look like they were conducting a parade and would be accompanied by music. The orders were followed to the letter and when Washington lined his army to greet Sullivan's men, it resulted in cheers and a hero's welcome. Morale soared and Washington's Army radiated hope.<sup>36</sup>

The arrival of General Sullivan on 20 December created an atmosphere of hope if only for a short time. It was in this short time, however, that General Washington, understanding the dire straits that his Army and America's independence was facing, devised a plan to conduct a raid on Trenton. Washington would provide the Army and America with hope if his "Victory or Death" raid succeeded.<sup>37</sup>

## TRENTON

The town of Trenton (Figure1-3) is located at the falls of the Delaware River. It is composed of about a hundred buildings and was one of the river ports in America. The town of Trenton has two main streets; Queen and King. These streets run parallel through the middle of town from the Delaware

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<sup>35</sup> Fast, 78.

<sup>36</sup> Powell, 7.

<sup>37</sup> Richard M. Ketchum, The Winter Soldiers. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1973), 286.

River. Trenton was like many other small towns in America except the fact that it would soon become the key battleground in the war for independence.

Prior to the raid on Trenton, the Hessian soldiers had built no fortifications. They were overconfident in their own abilities and the lack of ability within Washington's Army. The Hessian soldiers did not expect an attack in the near future. It was Christmas and the weather seemed insurmountable by an attacking force due to the snow and ice.

The total Hessian strength in the town was around 1586 soldiers (Figure 1-4). The forces were composed of the Rall Grenadiers, Lossberg Fusiliers, Knyphauser Fusiliers, Hessian Jaegers and British Light Dragoons. They were equipped with small arms and three pounder artillery pieces (6). Their main positions were located along Queen and King Streets running north and south through town. The Hessian soldiers were quartered in abandoned houses with the majority of forces located in a two story barracks in proximity to the river. In addition to the positions in town, the Hessian soldiers occupied outposts around Trenton that consisted of four main outposts. These outposts numbered between twenty-five and seventy-five Hessian soldiers each. Three of the outposts were located about three quarters of a mile from the center of town along Scotch and Princeton Roads. One of the outposts was located near the Assunpink Creek Bridge just south of town on the Bordentown Road. This outpost also served to guard the Trenton Ferry. Due to the severe weather, most of the Hessian soldiers at the various outposts and in town were billeted in houses.<sup>38</sup> On the night of the 25 and morning 26 December, there are no mobile guards patrolling the outposts.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> It should be noted here the total lack of force protection by Rall and his subordinates. He had no patrols out and if he had any thoughts towards force protection, the Hessian forces might well have compromised the raid.

<sup>39</sup> Powell, 32.



**Figure 1-3. Map of Trenton. 1. General's Greene's Route. 2. General Sullivan's Route. 3. Raid force Center. 4. First Encounter During Assault. 5. Second Push up Queen Street 6. Hessian Surrender in Apple Orchard. 7. Assunpink Bridge.** <sup>40</sup>

## WASHINGTON'S ARMY AND LEADERS

Washington's Army had the good fortune of being led by an officer corps of strong commanders during the raid on Trenton. All the commanders will not be mentioned in this section and it will focus in on the primary commanders who undoubtedly affected the outcome of the raid.

General Washington was almost forty-five at the time of the raid. He stood an impressive six foot three and weighed a bit over 200 pounds. General Washington was a Virginia gentleman who possessed every leadership trait associated with the military today.<sup>41</sup> He provided his subordinates

<sup>40</sup> <http://www.barracks.org/barracks/battle1.html>

<sup>41</sup> Marine Corps Leadership Traits

leadership beyond question. General Washington saved the raid. His personal leadership helped provide the moral factors that allowed the pyramid to remain balanced.

Nathaniel Greene was a former enlisted private turned general. Originally a Rhode Island blacksmith, Greene leads the Second Division of Washington's Army. He was dedicated to the patriot cause and his work ethic, ambition and battlefield ability make him indispensable in accomplishing the raid on Trenton. Greene felt that he has something to prove to Washington after his loss at Fort Mifflin. Greene soon proved himself a worthy leader in the raid on Trenton and his personal actions contributed to the success of the raid.<sup>42</sup>

John Sullivan, an Irishman from Maine, commanded the First Division. Sullivan was a lawyer when the war broke out and immediately joined the patriotic cause. He was a dependable and capable, but did not possess much initiative. Sullivan had been taken prisoner in the defeat at Long Island and released shortly after. He did however become an important figure during the raid.

Henry Knox led the artillery into the raid on Trenton. Knox was a former book-seller from Boston who had joined the cause at Bunker Hill. There he was made a Colonel and put in charge of the artillery. Knox was an intellect who also enjoyed his food in abundance. He was one of Washington's most trusted subordinates because of his sense of honor, intelligence, dependability and good humor. Knox was completely fearless and his compassion for his trade was infectious. His input and leadership contributed greatly to the success of the raid.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> General William S. Stryker, The Battles of Trenton and Princeton. (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1898), 348.

<sup>43</sup> Stryker, 350.

## THE PLAN

Washington's plan for the raid on Trenton (Figure 1-4 and 1-5) was made in the middle of winter across the Delaware River and nine miles away from Trenton. His men were exhausted, sick, under supplied and in desperate need of a victory after the three months of defeat. The exact time and date that he developed his tentative plan is not clear, but on the morning of 22 December 1776 in the Keith House, General Washington was tired and needed to do something. It was on this dreadful winter evening that General Washington looked out of his window and observed an American red-tailed hawk soaring majestically over a frozen field hunting its prey.<sup>44</sup> I submit that it was at this very moment that the initial plan was conceived and it would be further solidified with the aid of John Honeyman.<sup>45</sup>

Following that evening, General Washington was visited by John Honeyman. Honeyman was a former soldier serving with the British and had fought in the French and Indian War. He was a staunch loyalist to the American cause and offered his services to spy and provide intelligence to Washington on troop dispositions in and around Trenton. He provided Washington the ability to conduct both a diversion and misinformation plan against the Hessian Army. His information on the disposition of Hessian forces and their state of readiness within Trenton allowed General Washington to complete his plan.<sup>46</sup>

The plan was kept simple as there would be enough friction added by the weather, condition of the men and amount of intestinal fortitude required to execute any mission. Washington planned to conduct

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<sup>44</sup> Powell, 8.

<sup>45</sup> On the night Washington conceived the plan he saw the hawk searching for its vulnerable victim. Washington knew he had to do something or like the hawk, the army would be decimated. Washington saw the hawk use the cold to its advantage and wait for its unknowing prey using his strengths against its weakness. He saw the hawk swoop down and by catching the prey off-guard, live another day. Washington knew this is what he had to do and would solidify the rest of the plan with the help of Honeyman.

<sup>46</sup> Ketchum, 287.

a 26 December 1776 early morning raid on Trenton. The raid was expected to begin with crossing the Delaware River at McKonkey's Ferry Christmas night around 1800. He was planning to conduct the crossing using Glover's brigade of fisherman from Massachusetts in forty-man Durham boats. The boats were to carry all forces, equipment, artillery, and horses across the river using the cover of darkness for protection. Washington planned to establish two positions to block enemy reinforcements and hold outposts from escape. General Ewing was prepared to lead the first position across the Delaware River to establish their position below Trenton at Assunpink Creek. General Cadwalader planned to establish their second position below Ewing's position in vicinity of Bordentown. This position would serve as part of the deception plan. Cadwalader also had to be prepared to attack Bordentown mission. General Washington intended to lead the remainder of the force. General Sullivan had been assigned to lead First Division with three brigades, and General Greene was expected to lead the Second Division with three brigades. The force was expected to be across the Delaware River by midnight and conduct the nine-mile movement to Trenton. Once in the assault position, Washington's force was to conduct a two-division simultaneous surprise night raid on Trenton.<sup>47</sup>

General Washington weighed the risks involved and understood that the ice on the river, extreme weather, and the condition of his forces jeopardized mission success. He also understood that the extreme weather, Christmas Day and darkness could aid in his gaining surprise at Trenton. General Washington understood that secrecy was imperative to mission success and late on 24 December 1776, he issued his order to his commanders.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Fast, 108.

<sup>48</sup> Powell, 15.



Around a sketch map and aided by candlelight, General Washington issued the detailed order. Every minute detail was addressed by the commanders in the room including marking of officers for identification, noise discipline, and the importance and method of keeping flint and powder dry. The challenge and password was “Victory or Death”, and vows of secrecy were taken. The commanders present insured all watches were to the same time and then General Washington reiterated the need for obtaining surprise on the enemy to be successful. Washington toasted his commanders following the order and the excitement and resounding confidence of all those in the room would soon be manifested in the troops and in the conduct of the raid. Appendix A provides a copy of General Washington’s order for the raid. Appendix B provides a copy of the Task Organization.

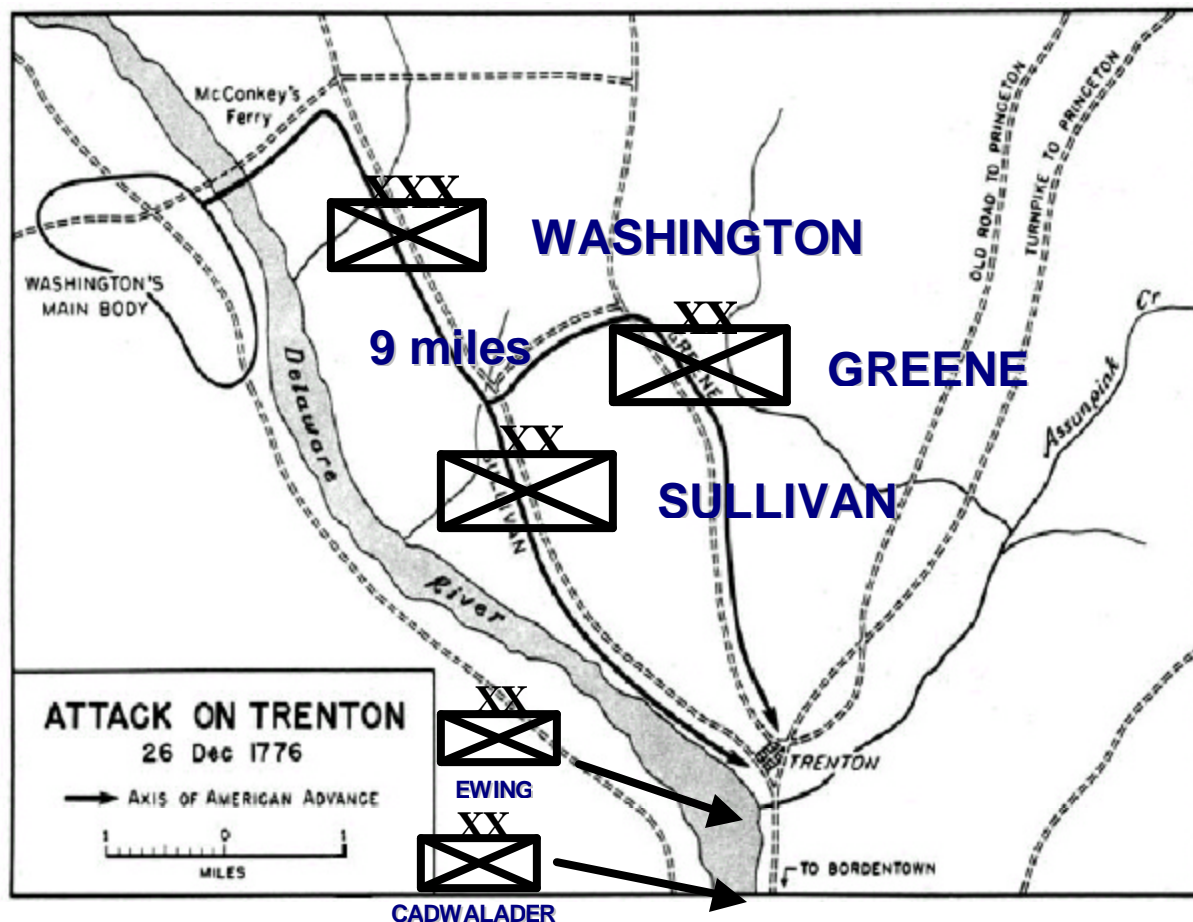
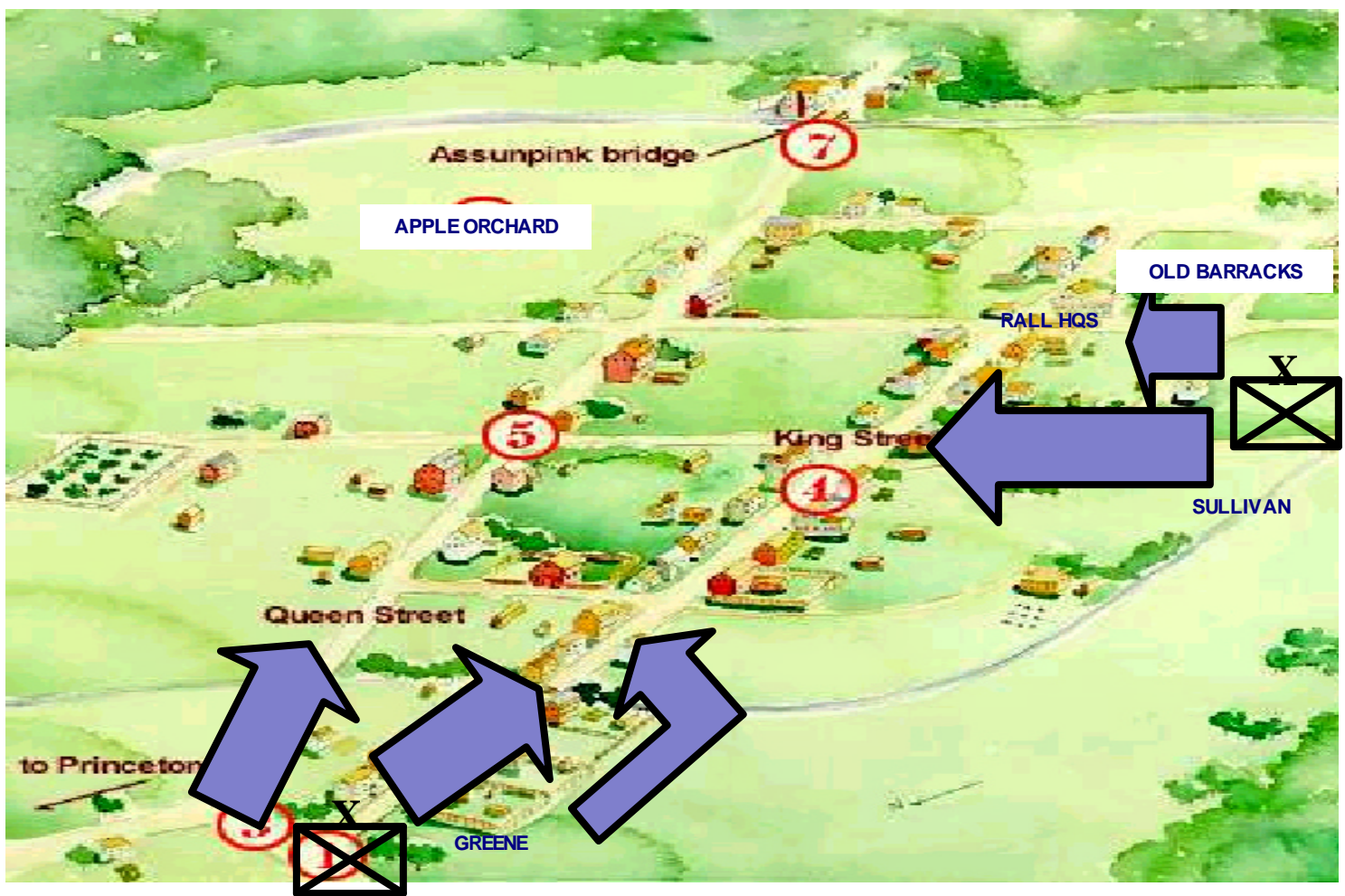


Figure1-4. Plan for Raid.



**Figure1-5. Plan for Raid.**

### **THE RAID ON TRENTON<sup>49</sup>**

At 1400 on 25 December 1776, the first units from Washington's 2400 man raid force began their movement to McKonkey's Ferry in preparation of the crossing. Washington noticed that many of the men were dressed in rags and others barefoot. Their route was frozen and blood was seen in the snow as the soldiers made their way to the assembly area west of the crossing point. The forces arrived at around 1600 to a storm of sleet and high wind. There were sheets of ice floating in the Delaware River and the bank on the other side of the river was barely seen as the men waited to board the boats.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>49</sup> During this section I will use Powell's paper as a reference extensively. He has written a great readable paper that is easy to follow the actions. Although I have used his paper, I have also double checked his references and corrected some items that were in discourse with the original authors.

<sup>50</sup> Ketchum, 297.

Embarkation of the raid force was delayed due to the shifting ice in the river. Colonel Knox controlled the embarkation site while Colonel Glover's men continued to struggle in their pursuit of loading artillery pieces, horses, and men within Washington's guidance of maintaining noise discipline. The embarkation was slow and by the time the first brigade crossed and established security on the far side of the river under the command of Adam Stephens, it was 1800 and night.<sup>51</sup>

With security on the far side set, Washington who was personally supervising the crossing, decided he could wait no longer and crossed the command post earlier than expected. His leadership from the front dictated that he be the first across. The boats moved across three and four at a time from behind Malta Island and landed on the far shoreline around 2000. Among the first to land with General Washington was Colonel Knox and Nathanael Greene. Once on the far side, General Washington refused to use a house for a command post, which would have protected him from the weather. Instead, he chose to remain amongst the men in the freezing sleet at the landing site. Washington waited, as six more brigades made it across undetected.<sup>52</sup>

Maintaining security on the embarkation point, the remainder of the brigades continued to cross and be placed in their designated positions at the landing site. Following Stephen's partial brigade of security was Mercer's brigade, Stirling's brigade, Fermoy's brigade, St. Clair's brigade, Glover's brigade, and Sargent's brigade in that order. The echo of the challenge and password; "Victory or Death" was heard throughout the night as the brigades crossed, landed and are placed in their designated areas. It took more than nine hours for all the forces to cross the frozen river arriving wet, and almost hypothermic. With all the forces across, the security set in by General Stephen's brigade

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<sup>51</sup> Powell, 23.

<sup>52</sup> Powell, 26.

collapsed and crosses the river. By 0300, all the assault force was safely across and under the cover of darkness and without being compromised.<sup>53</sup>

The force was more than three hours behind Washington's timeline and Washington had to adapt his plan to conduct a daylight raid vice the previous planned night raid. To make matters worse Washington's security forces given the mission to block enemy reinforcements and create a deception were not in place. General Ewing's force failed to conduct the crossing due to his evaluation that the weather and river conditions were too severe and would put his force in jeopardy if attempted. General Cadwalader attempted his crossing near Bordentown, but did not complete it. Cadwalader got 500 men over to the landing site, the preponderance of his forces, except for his cannons. Without his cannons, he decided to cancel the crossing for the same reasons as mentioned by Ewing and brought his forces back across the river. Without knowing the possible ramifications of their actions, both forces remained across the river away from their assigned positions during the raid.<sup>54</sup>

At 0400, Washington gave the order to move out leaving security for the boats at the landing site.<sup>55</sup> Washington moved out with two divisions behind him. General Greene's division was in the lead of the column with General Stephen's brigade as the point element. In Stephen's brigade was a detachment of artillerymen with spikes and hammers to disable enemy artillery pieces and ropes and harnesses for captured artillery pieces. General Mercer's brigade followed with four artillery pieces then General Sterling's brigades with three. The two lead brigade's mission was to assault Trenton from the north and northwest and use the split at Bear Tavern Road to guide them to Scotch Road and defeat the

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<sup>53</sup> Powell, 27.

<sup>54</sup> Powell, 27.

<sup>55</sup> Many historians will imply that Washington wanted to continue the attack after Trenton. Here is the first instance that General Washington had always planned to conduct a raid by leaving his boats where he could conduct a withdrawal back across the Delaware River following the raid.

enemy forces in zone. General Greene's final brigade mission was to establish positions northeast of Trenton and block enemy penetration from Princeton and was assigned to General Fermoy's brigade and his three artillery pieces.<sup>56</sup>

General Stephen's division followed General Greene's division, which was led by Colonel Sargent's brigade with four artillery pieces. Colonel Glover's brigade with three artillery pieces and General St Clair's brigade with two artillery pieces followed Colonel Sargent's brigade in that order. General Stephen's brigade's mission was to assault Trenton from the west and south using the split at Bear Tavern Road to guide them to River Road and defeat the enemy forces in zone.<sup>57</sup>

The Raid force moved down Bear Tavern Road with an advance guard of forty men for security. Additional security was provided to Washington's column by flank security provided by each brigade and a troop of Philadelphia Light Horse. The weather was severe and rain alternated with sleet during the evening. Washington and his subordinate leaders at all levels encouraged the men to press on in the pursuit of independence. It took nearly two hours of movement along the road before the Raid force reached the forked road release point where General Greene's division left the column toward Trenton. It had been a long journey across the icy Delaware River and up the Bear Tavern Road. The journey had taken its toll, but had transformed a group of ordinary men into a formidable fighting force of will, determination, and of one purpose. The cost of the journey so far had been two soldiers frozen to death after falling asleep during the movement.<sup>58</sup>

The Hessians remained unaware of the approaching raid force as the force prepared to hit their assault positions. The Trenton Hessian force commander, Colonel Rall, had been warned twice in the

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<sup>56</sup> Powell, 29.

<sup>57</sup> Powell, 30.

<sup>58</sup> Powell, 30.

last two days from sources that the patriots were planning to attack, but repeatedly discounted these reports as nonsense. This lack of belief of an impending attack further served Washington as raid forces ran into a picket guard on Scotch Road late in the evening and Hessian forces failed to realize its implications. After a quick search for the continental forces, they returned to their quarters and enabled Washington's Raid Force to survive the night undetected.<sup>59</sup>

Daylight approached on 26 December and the Washington's Raid Force found it increasingly difficult to keep their powder dry under the icy rain conditions. General Sullivan sent a runner to inform General Washington that all of his troop's powder was wet and he would not be able to fire their artillery or muskets once in the assault. General Washington looked at the runner for a moment then said, "Tell him to advance and charge!" With this information, the runner reported to General Sullivan with General Washington's exact words. The comment brought the whole column to life as they prepared to conduct their assault.<sup>60</sup>

The force passed the assault position at 0800 and General Washington forces broke into a "long trot" as they approach the first Hessian outpost on Scotch Road. Bayonets were fixed as the raid force moved on line seven minutes past sunrise. The weather was icy cold and still no word from the security positions of Ewing and Cawalader. The raid force remained undetected until reaching the Hessian outpost of Knyphausen's forces at the Howell cooper shop. Half dressed Hessians began to pour out of the shop as one guard yelled, "Der Fiend! Heraus! Heraus!"<sup>61</sup> The cry of the enemy! Caused a great stir as twenty-four soldiers and one officer tried to gain composure and get into the fight. General Washington had thoroughly surprised the enemy. As the lead regiment assaulted the enemy,

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<sup>59</sup> Fast, 125.

<sup>60</sup> Fast, 134-135.

<sup>61</sup> Stryker, 147.



Washington led the assault from the front and cheered the Virginia regiment on. The Hessian outpost was engulfed with the raid force's speed and most tried to withdrawal into town. Soon after, a company from the Lossberg regiment was also engulfed by the assault force which was a couple hundred yards behind the first Hessian outpost. The speed of the raid force left dead Hessian bodies behind as they pressed the assault.<sup>62</sup>

General Sullivan's First Division assault began about three minutes later as his advance forces assaulted the Jaeger outpost in the Dickinson house on River Road. Complete surprise was gained and the outpost of fifty men was engulfed by the speed of the raid force as they tried to withdrawal to the center of town.<sup>63</sup>



The speed and shock of the raid force caused Hessian outpost on the north and south edges of Trenton to withdrawal into town. Hundreds of Hessian soldiers ran through the streets of Trenton as the raid force used their speed to their advantage. The raid force remained synchronized as the two

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<sup>62</sup> Powell, 36.

<sup>63</sup> Powell, 38.

divisions assaulted along the two axis of advance through smoke, noise and the friction of battle. The entire raid force remained organized as they proceed along their designated routes as each division killed and maimed opposition in their path. The field artillery kept pace with the speed of the assaulting force and provided much needed fire support.<sup>64</sup>

At the corner of Queen and King Streets, John Stark conducted an assault with bayonets fixed. He understood the surprise they had gained and pushed his men forward. Mercer's brigade also understood the intent and pushed his forces forward with bayonets fixed. General Washington encouraged Mercer's brigade as they thoroughly defeated any and all enemy encountered. Glover's brigade moved to the right of Sargent's brigade with bayonets fixed and pushed toward the Assunpink Bridge to link up with Ewing's forces. Across the bridge, Sargent found no trace of General Ewing. On the high ground above King Street, Stirling's brigade moved forward and Fermony's brigade established its positions along the road as designated to block enemy reinforcements from Princeton. Stirling's brigade used its speed and shock over the Hessian forces as led by the Virginia Infantry of Colonel Weedon. James Monroe, future president, led the charge as the force captured two field artillery pieces, which hindered their movement. Monroe was shot through the shoulder, but survived the strike to the artery.<sup>65</sup>

General Washington continued to lead from the front as Hessian drums beat in the center of town. Washington's horse was suddenly hit from a volley of fire and the horse collapsed. Washington leaped from the horse and remounted the infamous white horse depicted in many paintings. In a matter of seconds, Washington was in the lead of the assaulting force again as the two gun battery of Alexander

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<sup>64</sup> Powell, 38.

<sup>65</sup> Powell, 38-39.



Hamilton and two other artillery pieces used grape shot to disrupt the Hessian forces under Knox's control. Mercer brigade continued to punish enemy positions using houses and fences for cover as they decimated all Hessian forces within their grasp. They proceeded to drive the enemy east and within thirty minutes of the initial assault, the enemy within the town of Trenton was in utter chaos.<sup>66</sup>

In town, Colonel Rall tried to rally his men upon being made aware of the raid. The speed at which the raid force had advanced and the devastation it had caused along the way forced Rall to assemble as many forces as he had left in the lower part of town. The forces under his command continued to pour out into the streets and form proper ranks in amazement as the raid force continued to advance. The forming of ranks provided the raid force an advantage as they moved forward. Rall's forces moved into position with the Lossberg regiments along King Street and Knyphauser's regiment moved into position along Queen Street. Both the Jaegers and British had escaped past Glover's forces out of town. All the Hessian artillery remained silent and remaining Hessian horses were defeated by Knox's artillery.<sup>67</sup>

The raid force continued to use speed in the assault and Rall's forces positioned on King and Queen Streets were thoroughly defeated and pushed toward the apple orchard to the east of town. Upon reaching the apple orchard, Rall only controlled the Lossberg regiments as the Knypausen regiment had been forced by Mercer's and St. Clair's men to the Quarter Meeting House southeast of town. Rall decided that the best chance of survival was to head for Princeton and was met head on by General Fermoy's brigade who was firmly in position blocking the withdrawal. Fermony's brigade unleashed a devastating volley of fire that killed many of the Hessians, which forced them back into town to face the onslaught of the raid force in pursuit.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Powell, 40.

<sup>67</sup> Powell, 41.

<sup>68</sup> Powell, 41.

Rall's Hessian forces fought their way back to the through town to the apple orchard and attempted one last stand. Knyphausen's forces continued their fight until they were forced north of mill pond. Rall was mortally wounded during the withdrawal and was unable to fight, as were many of the Hessian officers. The raid force continued to push forward in the icy storm as Mercer's, Stirling's, Stephen's and Fermony's brigades closed rapidly until it surrounded the Hessian soldiers who were throwing their weapons down. The raid force prepared to fire its final volley as the Hessian soldiers raised their remaining weapons in surrender. All Hessian colors were placed on the ground.<sup>69</sup>

On the other side of town near Assunpink Creek, raid forces remained engaged as St. Clair's, Sargent's and Glover's brigades were still engaged. Artillery support from Captain Moulder provided the needed boost as the solid shot penetrated the Hessian ranks of Knyphausen's soldiers. The Knyphausen soldiers tried to break out only to be met by deadly accurate fire from the raid force. Their commander was mortally wounded and the surrender occurred.<sup>70</sup>

The assault had lasted one hour and Washington's Raid Force had claimed Trenton.<sup>71</sup>

The raid was over and as the raid force assessed the situation, it found their casualty rate low. Two young officers had been wounded to include James Monroe and William Washington. Two other enlisted men had also been wounded and two had perished during the movement. To Washinton's delight, these were the only casualties that the raid force sustained on that cold, wet Christmas night. On the other side, the Hessian force had lost twenty-two dead, eighty-three wounded and nine hundred

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<sup>69</sup> Powell, 42.

<sup>70</sup> Powell, 42-44.

<sup>71</sup> Ketchum, 316.

and eighteen were prisoners. Six artillery pieces, three ammunition wagons and one thousand muskets were also captured along with supplies.<sup>72</sup>

Washington's Raid Force was tired cold and hungry as men slept in the streets and scavenged for much needed supplies. Washington understood that the raid force must withdrawal back to the river prior to reinforcements arriving. He had left the boats on his side of the river and would conduct the withdrawal according to plan. He also knew that Ewing and Cadwalader had failed to cross the Delaware River and that his raid force must move soon. There would be no way he could deviate from his original plan now and press the attack toward Brunswick. Washington with this in mind told General Sullivan to be prepared to move out by 1200 according to the original plan.<sup>73</sup> The raid force departed along the same route they had moved toward Trenton on back to the landing site. The men were tired, but exuberant with their latest victory as the moved nine miles to the landing site and then back across the Delaware. It was after nightfall when all the raid force was safely back across the river and their mission was complete.<sup>74</sup>

## **ANALYSIS**

### **WAS THE RAID WORTH THE RISK?**

Prior to the raid on Trenton there was a shortage of food, shoes, stockings, coats and shirts. Disease was running out of control throughout the army and six of every ten men were incapable of fighting.<sup>75</sup> To complicate matters, enlistments were running out at the cyclic rate with the soldiers

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<sup>72</sup> Powell, 46.

<sup>73</sup> Here is the second time that Washington's plan for withdrawal was in fact preconceived. He does not elude to any attack, nor does he look for counsel in his decision. He had made his mind up in planning.

<sup>74</sup> Fast, 160.

<sup>75</sup> Fast, 97.

choosing to return home. Washington's Army was losing faith.<sup>76</sup> The winter weather of the year 1776 was one of the worst in recent times for Washington's Army. As the days became shorter and the nights longer, Washington's Army was in the survival mode. Washington was in desperate need of a moral boost for his men.<sup>77</sup> If he did not accept the risk of conducting the raid, it is quite possible the struggle for independence would have been over.

This assumption of risk led to the raid on Trenton, which became the first victory the Continental Army had achieved in the Revolutionary War and possibly the most important raid ever conducted in history. The raid on Trenton boosted America towards independence by giving the revolution hope and by providing a spirit of victory that we still hold today. The raid successfully used all the principles of raid operations and is worthy of study by raid forces today.

### **RELATIVE SUPERIORITY**

Relative superiority had been gained over the Hessian forces within minutes of the first shots fired at Trenton. The raid however, was far from over as there would possibly be a withdrawal under heavy British pressure.

The relative superiority graph (Figure1-6) demonstrates that the point of vulnerability occurred when the assault force began its movement toward Trenton. Prior to this the Hessians had no forces posted on the river where the crossing took place and the weather kept the Hessian soldiers closer to town. Patrols had been canceled due to weather, Christmas and the overall feeling that the Continentals would never attack. If the Hessian forces would have put out numerous patrols, it would possibly have

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<sup>76</sup> Powell, 3.

<sup>77</sup> Fast, 78.

discovered the raid force moving and been able to maintain contact. This would have proved to be disastrous for the raid force that desperately needed to gain surprise.

After achieving initial surprise within Trenton, the raid force wasted no time pushing the enemy through town. The area of vulnerability between gaining relative superiority and mission completion was shortened through the intense leadership of the raid force and speed. The raid force effectively used speed to close immediately with the enemy and prevented them from organizing and massing. They continued to press the assault until the enemy was dead or had surrendered within town. Considering that the assault only lasted one hour is remarkable. What is even more remarkable is that the force was able to withdrawal back across the river prior to nightfall in this age of warfare.

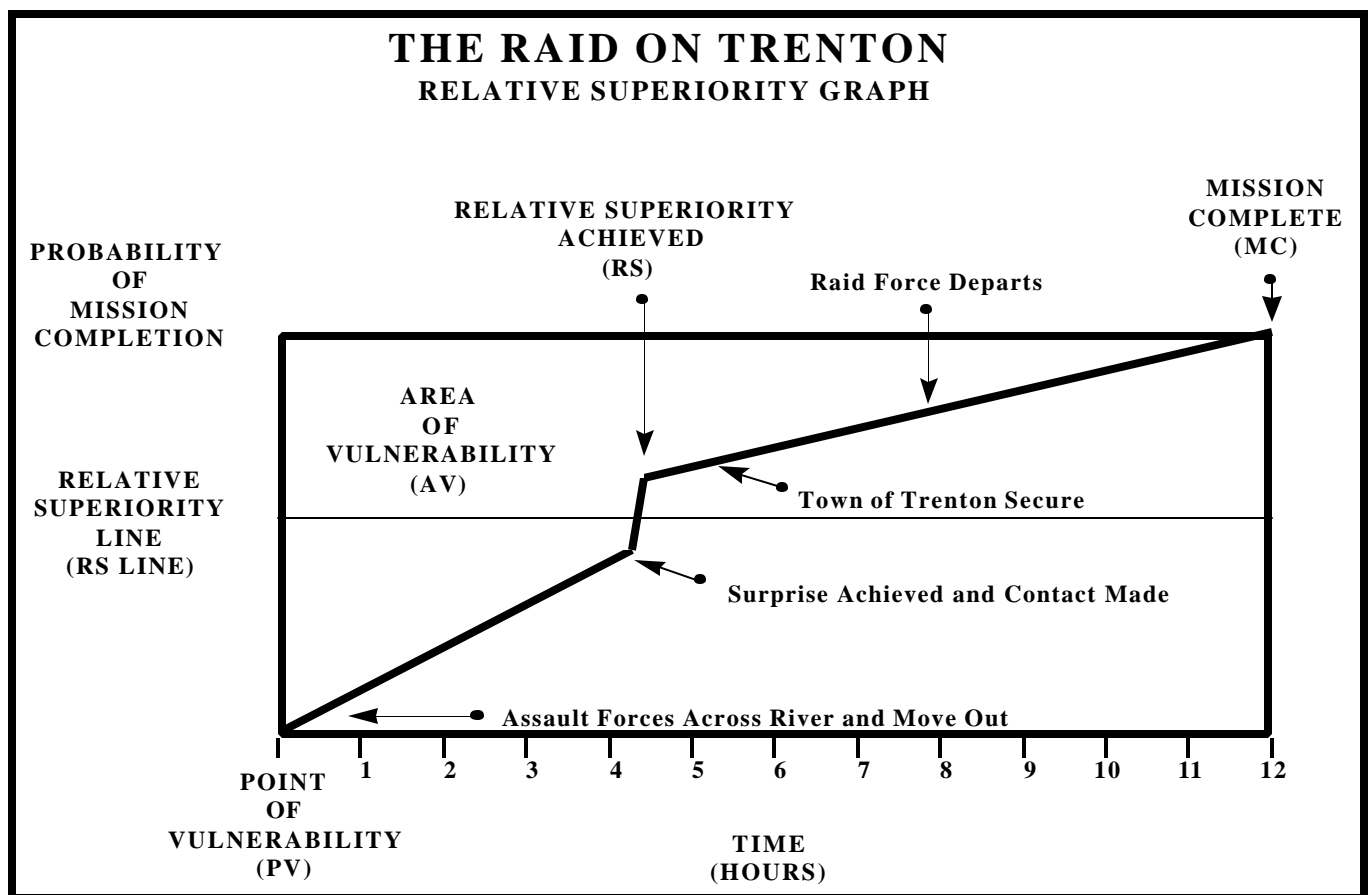


Figure 1-6.

## **ANALYSIS OF THE PRINCIPLES OF RAID OPERATIONS**

### **SIMPLICITY**

The raid on Trenton maximized the three elements of simplicity. From the time General Washington formulated the plan, until the execution of the raid; the plan was kept simple and did not change. The plan was developed with Washington's understanding that there would be enough friction added by the weather, condition of the men, and amount of intestinal fortitude to execute the raid. Washington provided two guides to each brigade for speed and direction of movement and marked officers with white paper to limit the confusion during battle. Every detail was thought through and moving part minimized to reduce friction.

Washington also reduced friction when he contracted the use of John Honeyman to spy and provide intelligence on troop dispositions in and around Trenton. His information provided the necessary details of the disposition of forces and state of readiness within Trenton to formulate a detailed plan in a matter of days. The information provided by Honeyman increased the raid forces chance of survival from the outset and was a key factor in the overwhelming success of the raid.

Innovative tactics were also used in the Trenton raid to overcome the disadvantages of the raid force, thereby simplifying the plan. Washington's use of a raid operation instead of the linear force on force tactics at the time provided a force multiplier. The raid force allowed the army to fight a piece of the much larger British forces and then withdrawal before reinforcements could arrive. Raid operations had not been done prior to Trenton and changed the way warfare would be fought during the rest of the war.

Washington's use of the artillery was also an innovative factor in the raid. Instead of massing the artillery, Washington interspersed them within the assault force columns. Within each column he placed two artillery pieces within each brigade, which provided the assault force immediate firepower and was one of the first examples of combined arms.

The raid on Trenton was an excellent example of using the element three elements of simplicity in the execution of a raid.

## **SECURITY**

General Washington understood that secrecy was imperative to mission success and late on 24 December 1776, issued his order to his commanders. In his order, he gave explicit instructions as to the implications of the disaster that could arise if the force was compromised. Washington went so far as to make every member present take a vow of secrecy.

General Washington effectively used the raid force's brigades to provide flank security and a force to provide an advance guard which, when combined, gave the entire raid force security. He planned to use two security forces of Ewing and Cadwalader to establish perimeter security and isolate the raid site from reinforcements. Neither of these forces made it to their positions, which could have proved disastrous if the British reinforcements pushed to the crossing site. Luckily this did not happen and the raid force withdrew without pressure.

The raid force was very successful in their use darkness to cover their movement. They were aided by the winds, rain in sleet in their quest to remain undetected. Their inherent understanding of the need rectified the one instance of the force making contact early quickly for surprise and Washington's ability to conduct a diversion and misinformation plan against the Hessian Army through Honeyman. Although the raid force was unable to attack at night due to earlier troubles in their movement across the

Delaware River, they were able to conduct the raid just seven minutes after sunrise. In retrospect, this probably aided in their ability to maintain tempo.

Throughout the raid, secrecy was preached and every member of the raid force understood that they must do everything in their power to remain undetected throughout the initial phases of the raid.

Individual actions of every member of the raid force assists on obtaining relative superiority and allows the raid force to achieve total surprise. Examples can be seen throughout the raid execution from the time the order was issued through to initial contact within Trenton.

### **REPETITION**

Due to the compressed timeline prior to the execution of the raid, no rehearsals were done. This was the first time a raid operation of this type was conducted and the lack of rehearsals luckily did not adversely affect the raid in any way. Repetition for the raid can be found in the numerous combat leaders and men who had fought previous battles. This repetition was in the form of weaponeering and not mission specific.

The raid plan was simple and the members involved were able to conduct their individual and small unit assaults as in previous battles. The planned withdrawal was rehearsed in the previous three months of battles in the form of retreat. The only difference was that this time it was planned.

The plan was discussed in detail among the leaders. A map rehearsal was conducted on the evening of the order, and the fact that all members of the raid force knew their role, is repetition in itself. Small unit rehearsed specific details, but due to time and secrecy, unit rehearsals could not be completed. This is not the preferred method, and it luckily did not have a huge impact on the raid.



## **SURPRISE**

In the raid on Trenton, surprise was not absolute, but combined with deception provided by Honeyman, was sufficient enough to allow the raid force to penetrate the town of Trenton and catch the Hessian soldiers unaware.

Early in the planning, General Washington weighed the risks involved and understood that the ice on the river, extreme weather, and his forces condition could jeopardize mission success. He knew that the Hessian soldiers did not expect an attack in the near future. He also understood that the extreme weather, Christmas, and darkness would aid in gaining surprise during the raid on Trenton.

Although surprise was manifested in the initial actions in town, those actions were only possible because the idea of conducting a raid against the larger British force in the middle of a ice storm at Christmas, was improbable. The boldness of the plan created an environment in which gaining surprise was possible. The raid was a total surprise to the British forces because the idea of an attack was unrealistic knowing the state of Washington's forces.

## **SPEED**

In a raid, more so than a simple attack, speed becomes vitally important. The raid force is at a tremendous disadvantage due to the fact it must defeat the enemy on the objective and then escape before reinforcements arrive.<sup>78</sup> The raid on Trenton demonstrates how speed on the objective is a necessity to success and how it drives tempo.

From the moment the raid was planned, speed would be a key factor when conducting actions on the objective. Washington had organized for speed and placed artillerymen, without artillery pieces,

within the lead brigades. The artillerymen took spikes, hammers, and harnesses to destroy or carry away captured artillery pieces to keep tempo. He also had all members of the raid force fix bayonets due to wet powder and in preparation of running through the enemy instead of the slow linear battle.

Washington knew that the key to success was forcing the enemy's hand after initial surprise was gained and use speed to close on pieces of the enemy's forces negating his ability to mass. Throughout the raid, officers could be seen in the front of their forces pushing their men forward and taking full advantage of tempo. The British never had a chance to form in box formation in mass and it allowed the assault force to complete their mission in one hour.

Although seeming long today, one hour was remarkable for this period. In this hour, the raid force had thoroughly defeated the Hessian forces with black powder weapons and bayonets. They had effectively secured a victory using speed and raid tactics uncommon for the times. It was a remarkable feat for anyone under these conditions and clearly demonstrates that speed was instrumental in the success on the ground.

## **PURPOSE**

The success of the raid on Trenton demonstrates that by identifying the purpose early instills a sense of commitment and allows all members of the Raid force to focus on what is important. Time and again, Washington stressed the purpose of the mission throughout the preparation. He told all leaders, **“Impress upon the mind of every man, from the lowest, the importance of the cause, and what it is they are contending for.”**<sup>79</sup> Every member of the raid force understood that independence would be lost forever if the raid failed. Leaders at all levels reinforced the importance of the raid and it

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<sup>78</sup> McRaven, 245.

<sup>79</sup> Washington, 6-7.

was even found in the challenge and password of “Victory or Death.” With the purpose clear and a sense of unwavering commitment throughout the force, the raid was bound to succeed. It would take more than armies to deny the raid force its chance at independence.

## **CONCLUSION**

The raid on Trenton is a perfect example of A TEXTBOOK raid. Relative Superiority was achieved within minutes of the first shots fired in Trenton due to the proper application of the raid principles. It was a small force with a simple plan that maintained security. Although not thoroughly rehearsed, the plan was imbedded in all the raid forces minds. The operation was executed with surprise, speed and a purpose of independence. The Hessian forces in and around Trenton were penetrated before they had time to react and mass and relative superiority was sustained through the use of combined arms, bayonets, and supreme dedication. The principles used correctly minimized the frictions of war. Other frictions of war encountered during execution were eliminated throughout the battle by the moral factors of courage and boldness.

## **APPENDIX A: WASHINGTON'S OPERATIONS ORDER**

**25 DECEMBER 1776**

*Each brigade to be furnished with two guides. General Stephen's brigade to form the advance party, and to have with them a detachment of the artillery without cannon, provided with spikes and hammers to spike up the enemies' cannon in case of necessity, or to bring them off if it can be effected, the party to be provided with drag-ropes for the purpose of dragging off the cannon. General Stephen is to attack and force the enemy's guards and seize such posts as may prevent them from forming in the streets, and in case they are annoyed from the houses to set them on fire. The brigades of Mercer and Lord Stirling, under the command of Major General Greene, to support Stephen. This is the 2<sup>nd</sup> division or left wing of the army and to march by the way of Pennington Road.*

*St. Clair's, Glover's, and Sargent's brigades, under Major General Sullivan, to march by the River Road. This is the first division of the army, and to form the right wing. Lord Stirling's brigade to form the reserve left wing, and General St. Clair's brigade the reserve of the right wing. These reserves to form a second line in conjunction, or a second line to each division, as circumstances may require. Each brigadier to make the colonels acquainted with the posts of their respective regiments and brigade, and the major generals will inform them of the posts of the brigades in the line. Four artillery pieces of artillery to march at the head of each column; three pieces at the head of the second brigade of each division; and two pieces at the head with each of the reserves. The troops to be assembled one mile back of McKonkey's Ferry, and as soon as it begins to grow dark, the troops to be marched to*

*McKonkey's Ferry, and embark on board the boats in the following order under the direction of Colonel Knox.*

*General Stephen's brigade, with the detachment of artillerymen, to embark first; General Mercer's next; Lord Stirling's next; General Fermony's next, who will march into the rear of the second division and file off from the Pennington to the Princeton Road in such direction that he can with the greatest ease and safety secure the passes between Princeton and Trenton. The guides will be the best judges of this. He is to take two pieces of artillery with him. St. Clair's, Glover's, and Sargent's brigades to embark in order. Immediately upon their debarkation, the whole to form and march in subdivisions from the right. The commanding officers of the regiments to observe that the division be equal and that the proper officers be appointed to each. A profound silence to be enjoined, and no man to quit his ranks on the pain of death. Each brigadier to appoint flanking parties; the reserve brigades to appoint the rear-guards of the columns; the heads of the columns to be appointed to arrive at Trenton at five o'clock.*

*Captain Washington and Captain Flahaven, with a party of forty men each, to march before the divisions and post themselves on the road about three miles from Trenton, and make prisoners of all going in or out of town.*

*General Stephen will appoint a guard to form a chain of sentries round the landing-place at a sufficient distance from the river to permit troops to form, this guard not to suffer any*

*person to go in or come out, but to detain all persons who attempt either. This guard to join their brigade when the troops are all over.*<sup>80</sup>

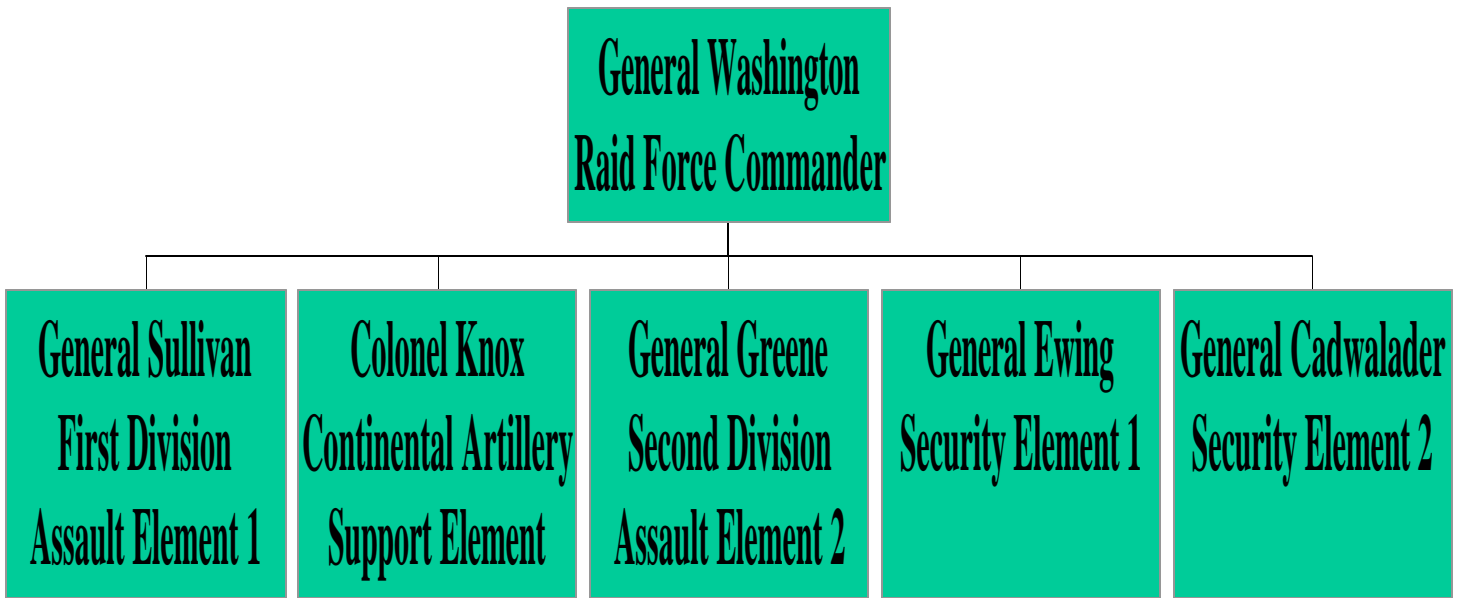
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<sup>80</sup> Fast, 204-205. This order was dictated by Washington following the verbal order given and distributed to his commanders. Greater detail was placed in the verbal order.

**APPENDIX B: RAID TASK ORGANIZATION**

**25 DECEMBER 1776<sup>81</sup>**

**RAID FORCE**



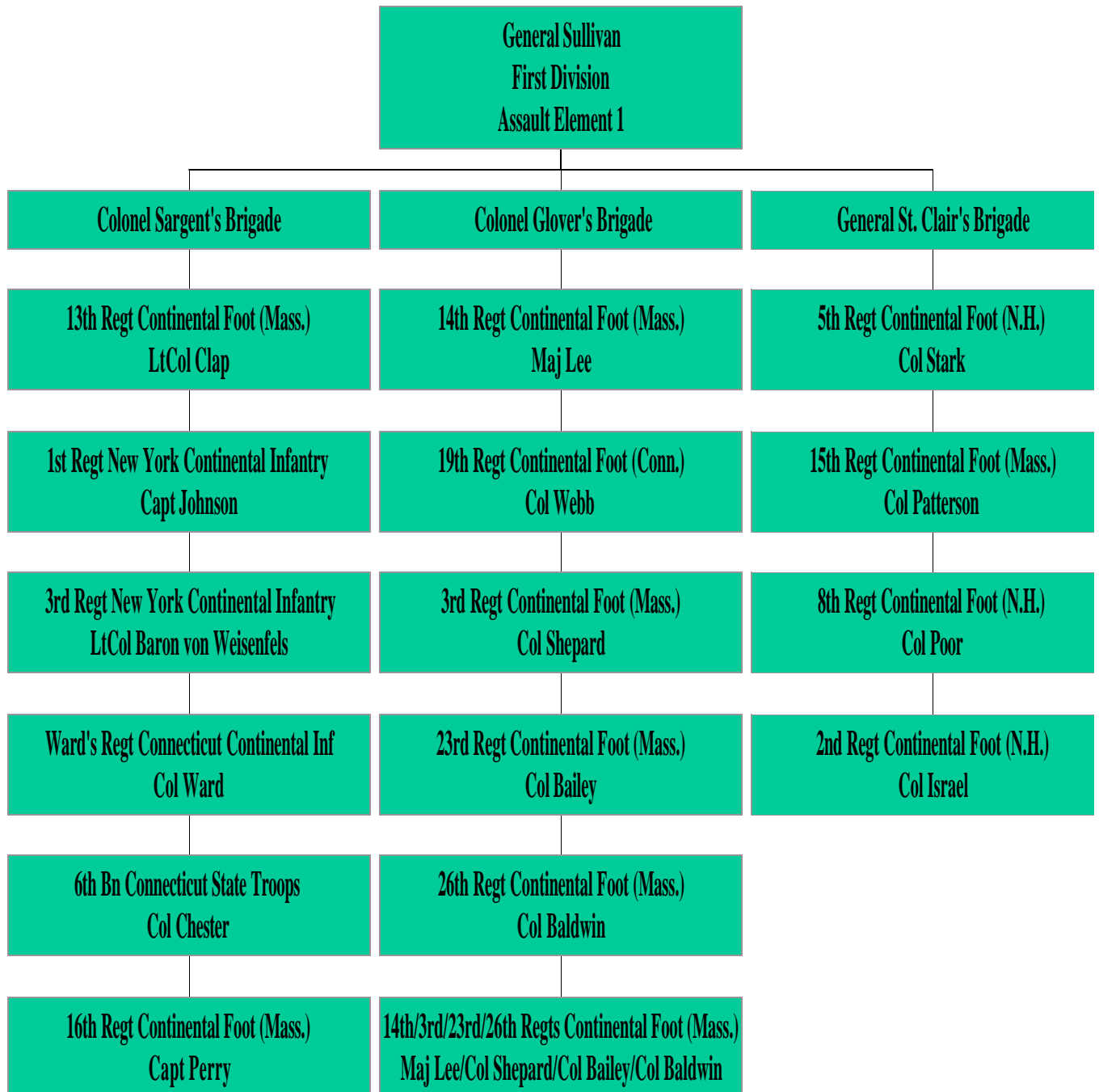
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<sup>81</sup> Powell, Appendix A

**APPENDIX B: RAID TASK ORGANIZATION (Con't)**

**25 DECEMBER 1776**

**ASSAULT ELEMENT 1**

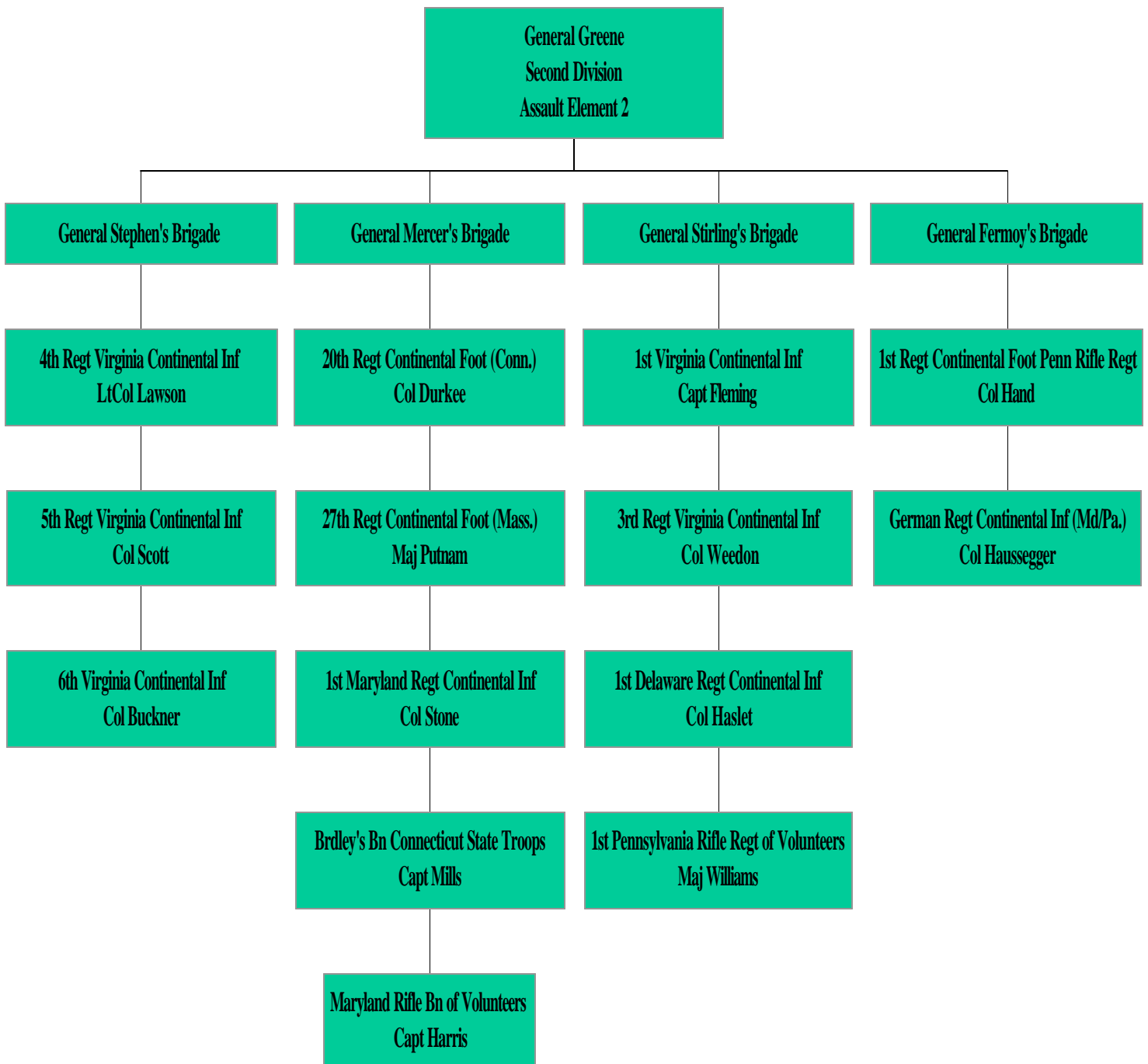




**APPENDIX B: RAID TASK ORGANIZATION (Con't)**

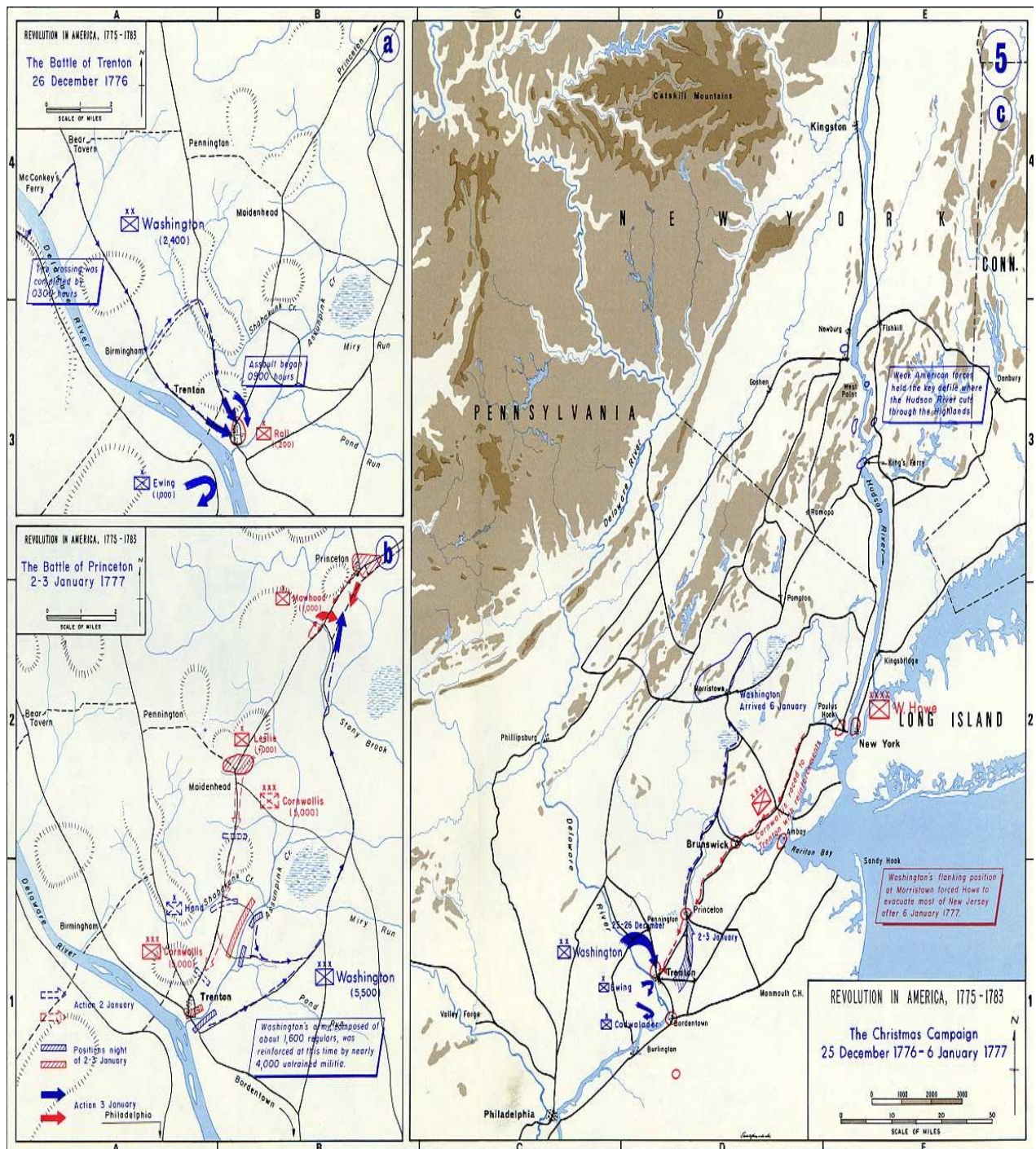
**25 DECEMBER 1776**

**ASSAULT ELEMENT 2**



## **APPENDIX C: BIBLIOGRAPHY**

## ILLUSTRATION 1: OVERVIEW OF WASHINGTON'S RETREAT AND TRENTON<sup>82</sup>



<sup>82</sup> <http://www.dean.usma.usma.edu/history/historymaps/american%20revolution>



# **RAID ON TRENTON**

## **25 DECEMBER 1776**





# **SPECIAL SITUATION**

**25 December 1776**

- **Enemy**

- Linear formations were seen during the on 16 November 1776 at Fort Washington and on 20 November 1776 at Fort Lee.
- Howe' forces have inflicted devastating defeats in casualties and morale.
- General Howe chose not to pursue the Army across the Delaware River.
- Instead, he has established posts throughout New Jersey and, as per the customs of warfare at that time, use winter as a break in fighting.
- Furthest South Located at Trenton.



# **SPECIAL SITUATION**

**25 December 1776**

- **Friendly**
  - **“The American Crisis.” “These are the times that try men’s souls.”**
  - **Original Continental Army of 21,000 has been reduced to 4,000 men during the past three months of fighting the British Army and caused our retreat across the Delaware River to Pennsylvania in our current location**
  - **Shortage of food, shoes, stockings, coats and shirts.**
  - **Disease is running out of control throughout the Army and six of every ten men are incapable of fighting.**
  - **Enlistments are running out at the cyclic rate during December and soldiers are choosing to return home.**





# **SPECIAL SITUATION**

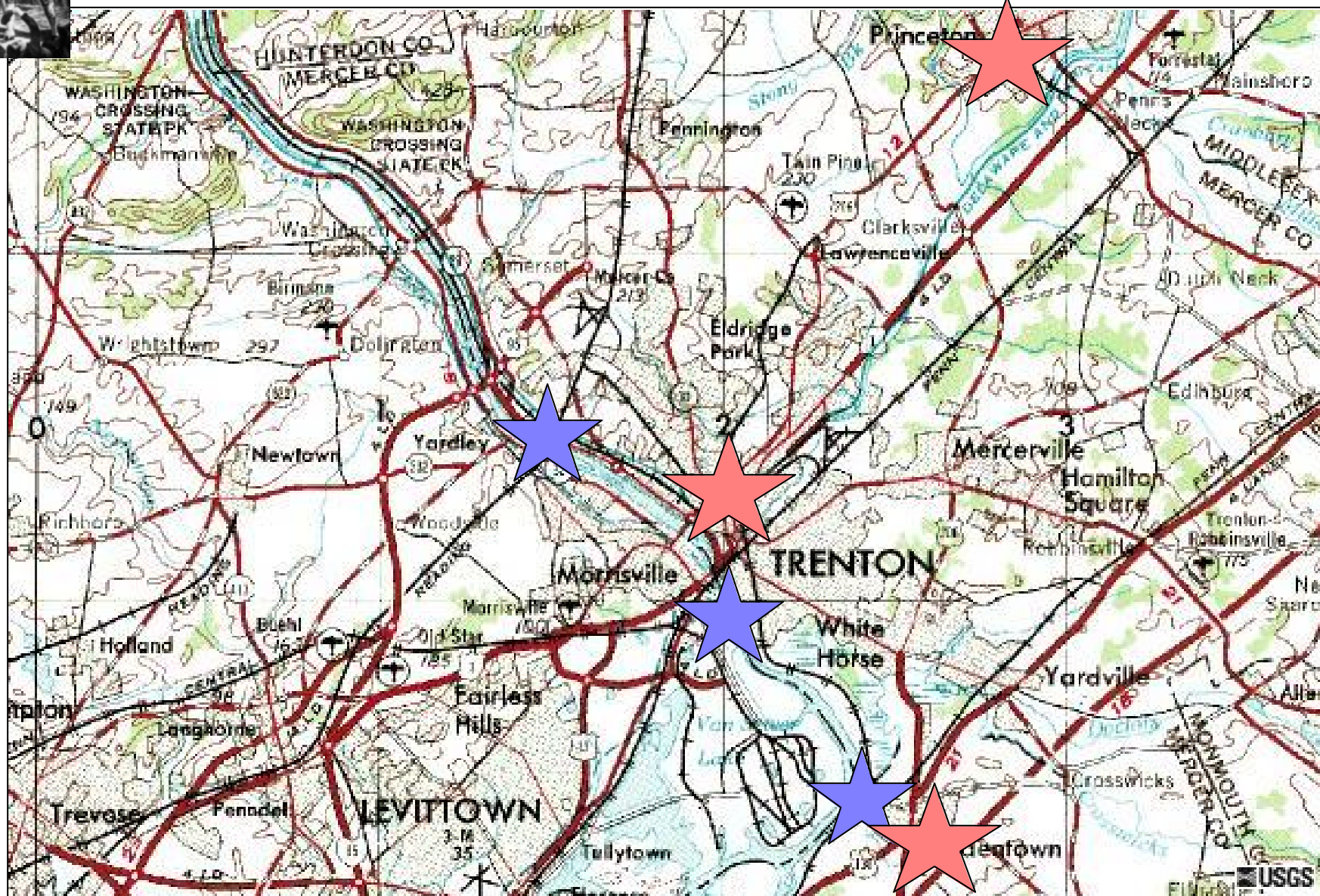
**25 December 1776**

- **Friendly**
  - **Linear warfare might not be the best way to fight a war. The key to the success of a smaller force is to use hit and run tactics, ambushes and the night to the attacker's advantage.**
  - **Original Continental Army of 21,000 has been reduced to 4,000 men during the past three months of fighting the British Army and caused our retreat across the Delaware River to Pennsylvania in our current location**
  - **New strategy test needed / Protracted War.**



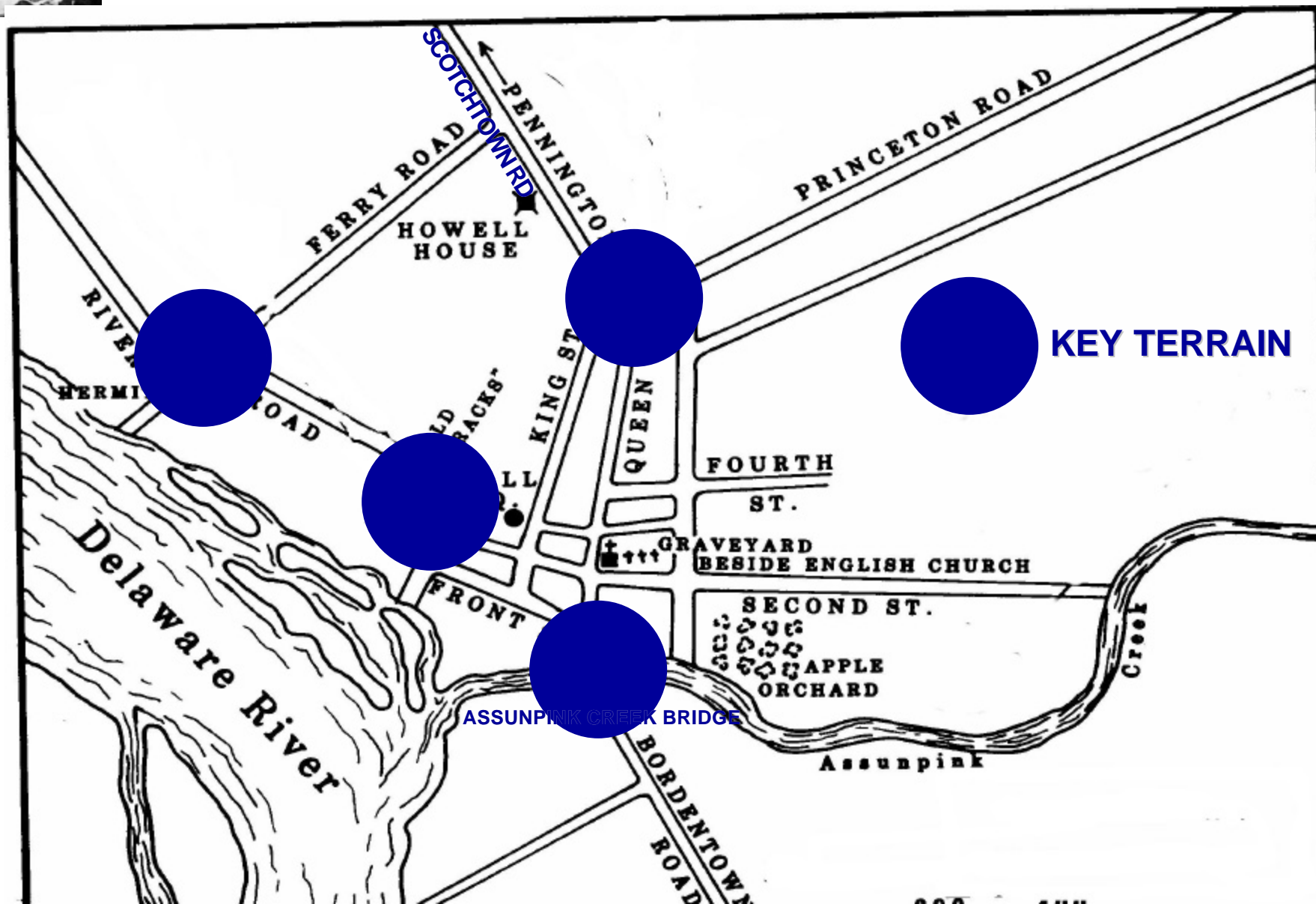


# AREA OF OPERATIONS





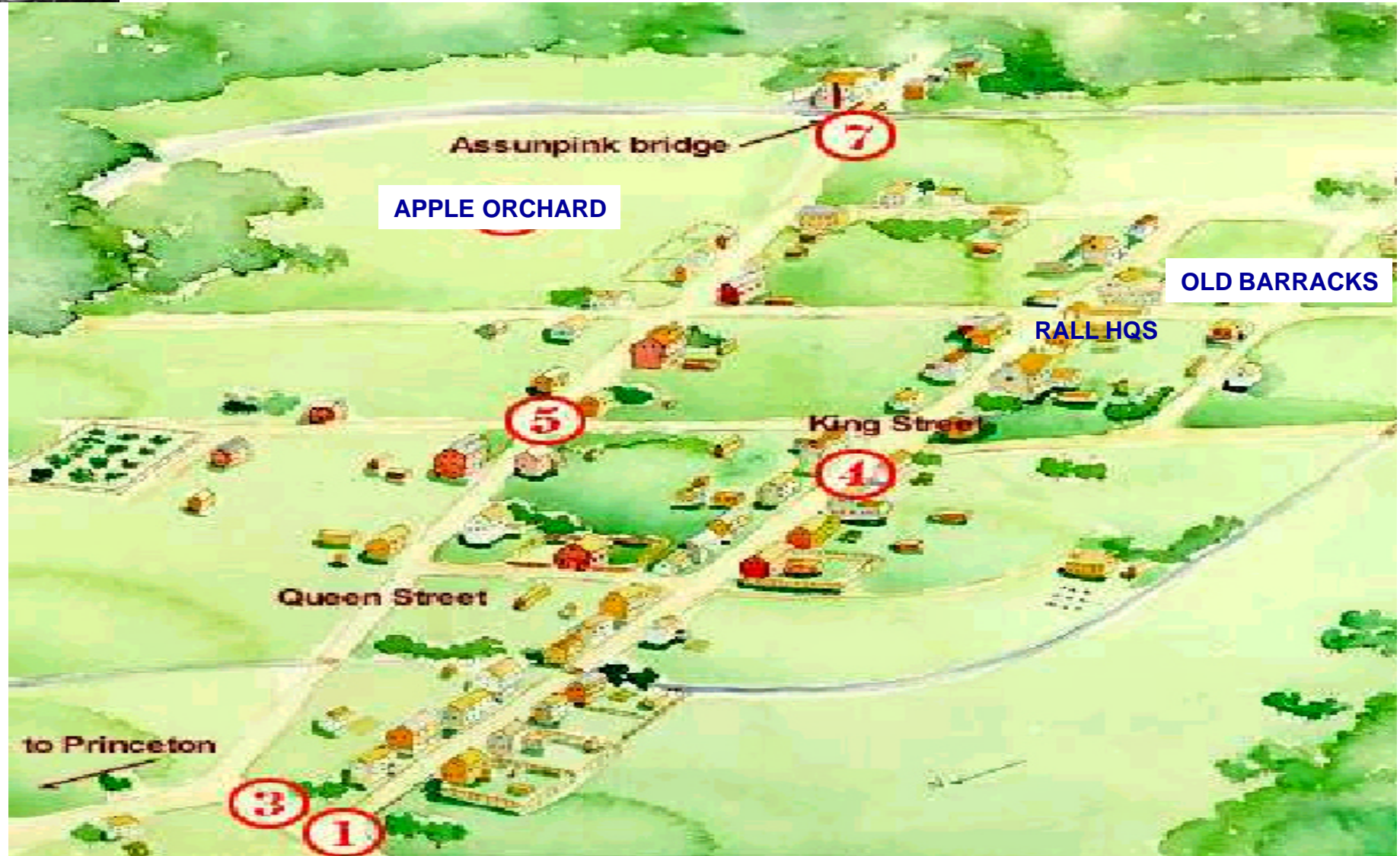
# AREA OF OPERATIONS







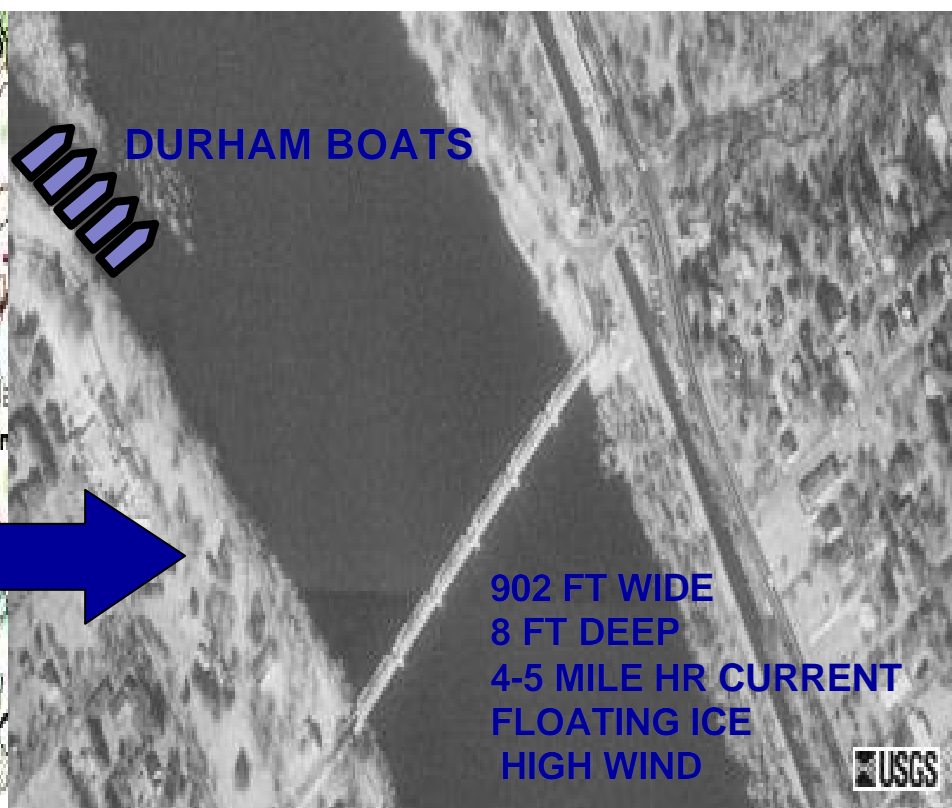
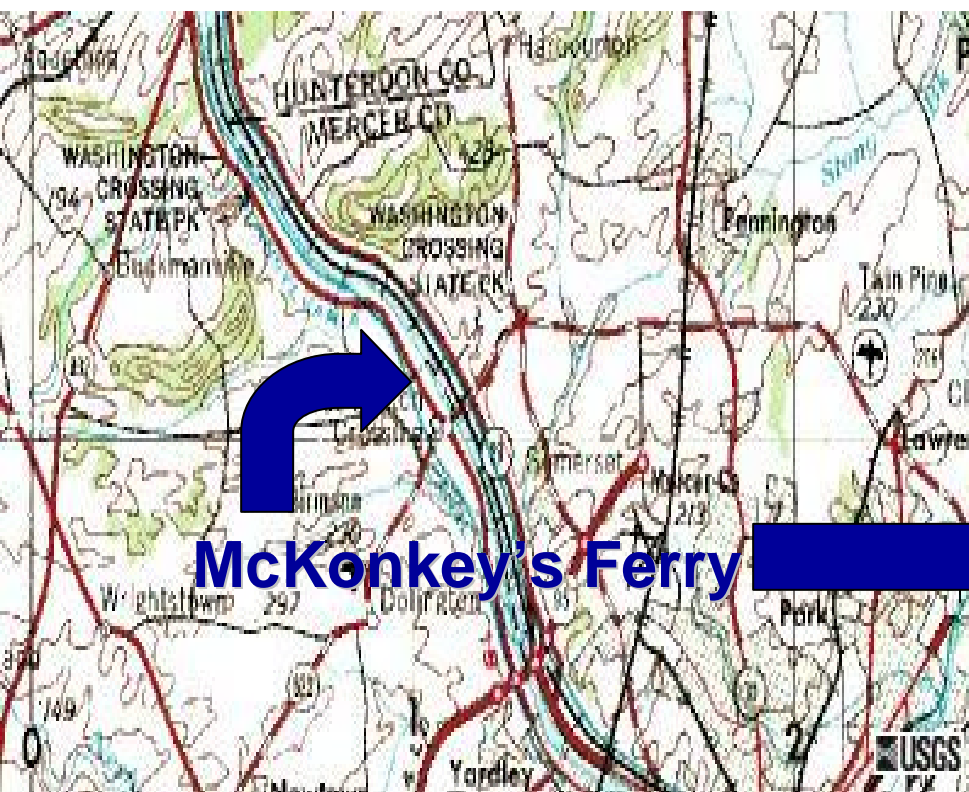
# AREA OF OPERATIONS





# SIGNIFICANT TERRAIN LANDING SITES

## Northern Crossing Site



**DURHAM BOATS**

**902 FT WIDE  
8 FT DEEP  
4-5 MILE HR CURRENT  
FLOATING ICE  
HIGH WIND**

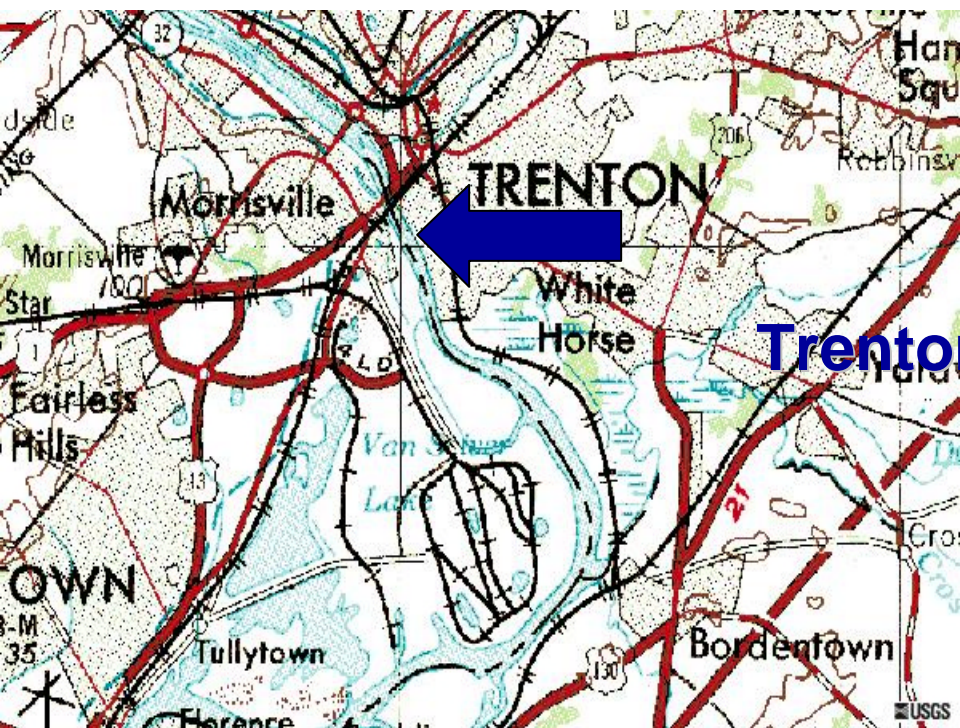




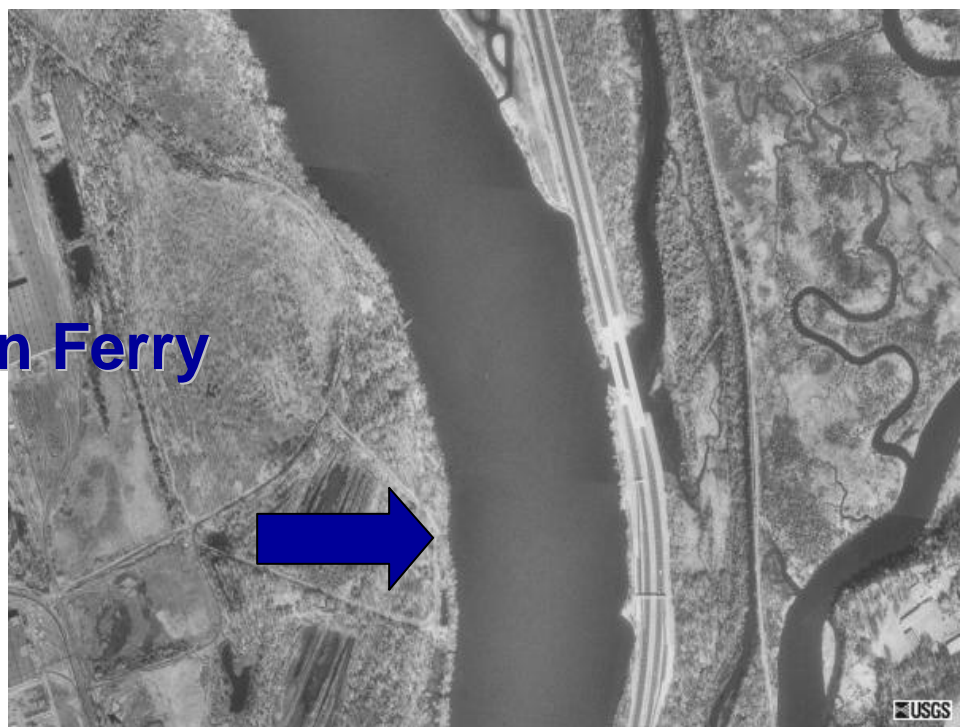


# SIGNIFICANT TERRAIN LANDING SITES

## Middle Crossing Site



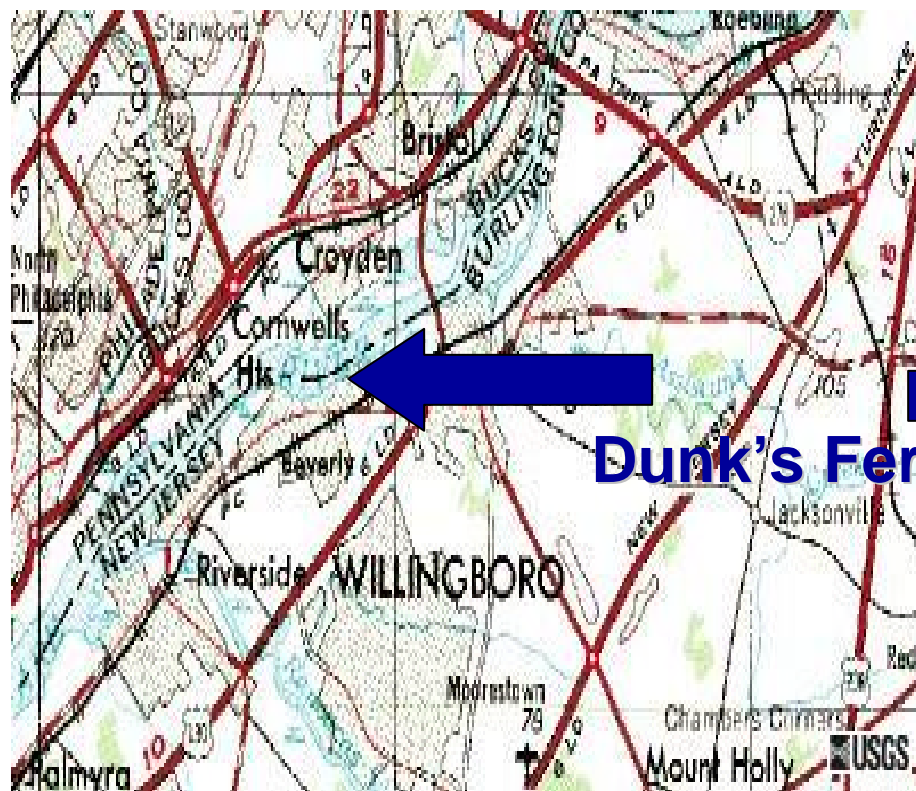
Trenton Ferry





# SIGNIFICANT TERRAIN LANDING SITES

## Southern Crossing Site



**Dunk's Ferry**

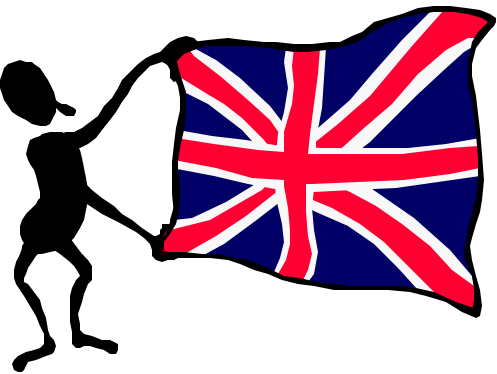




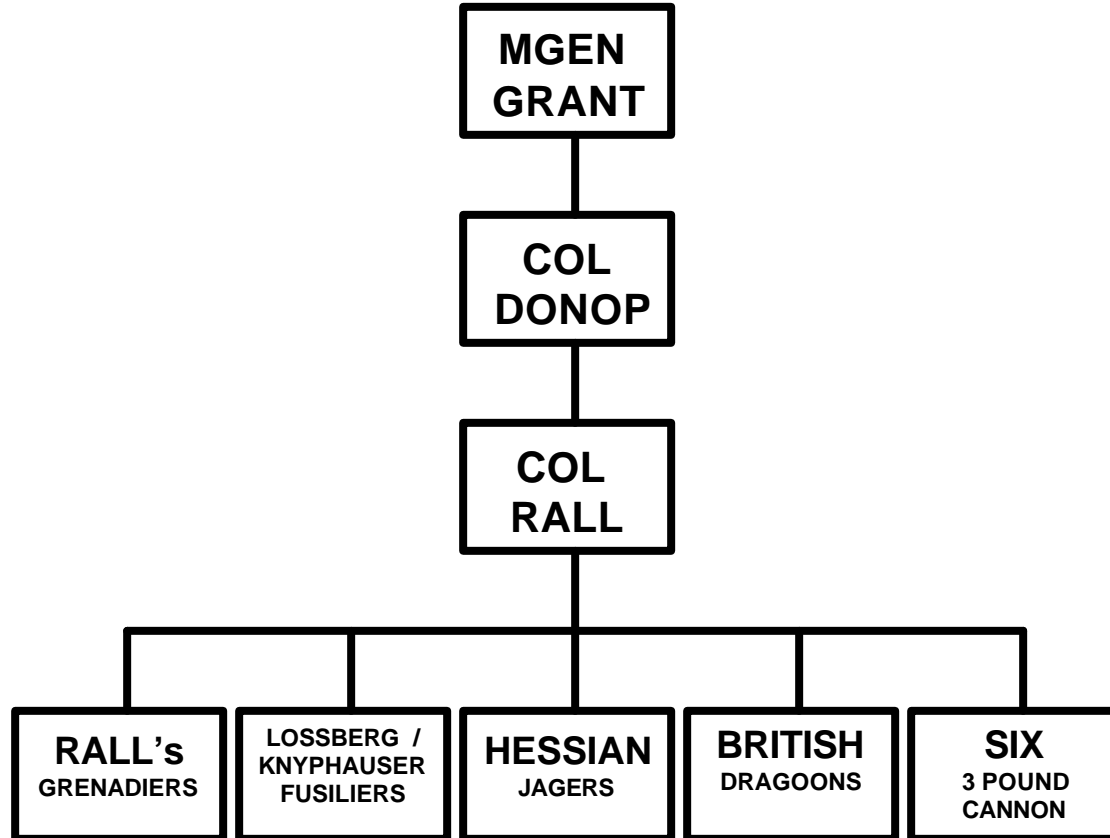


# SIGNIFICANT TERRAIN LANDING SITES

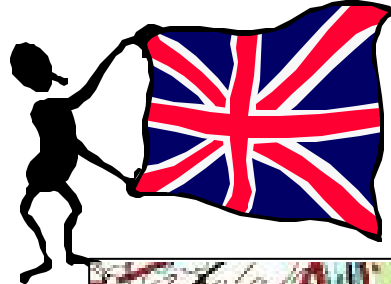




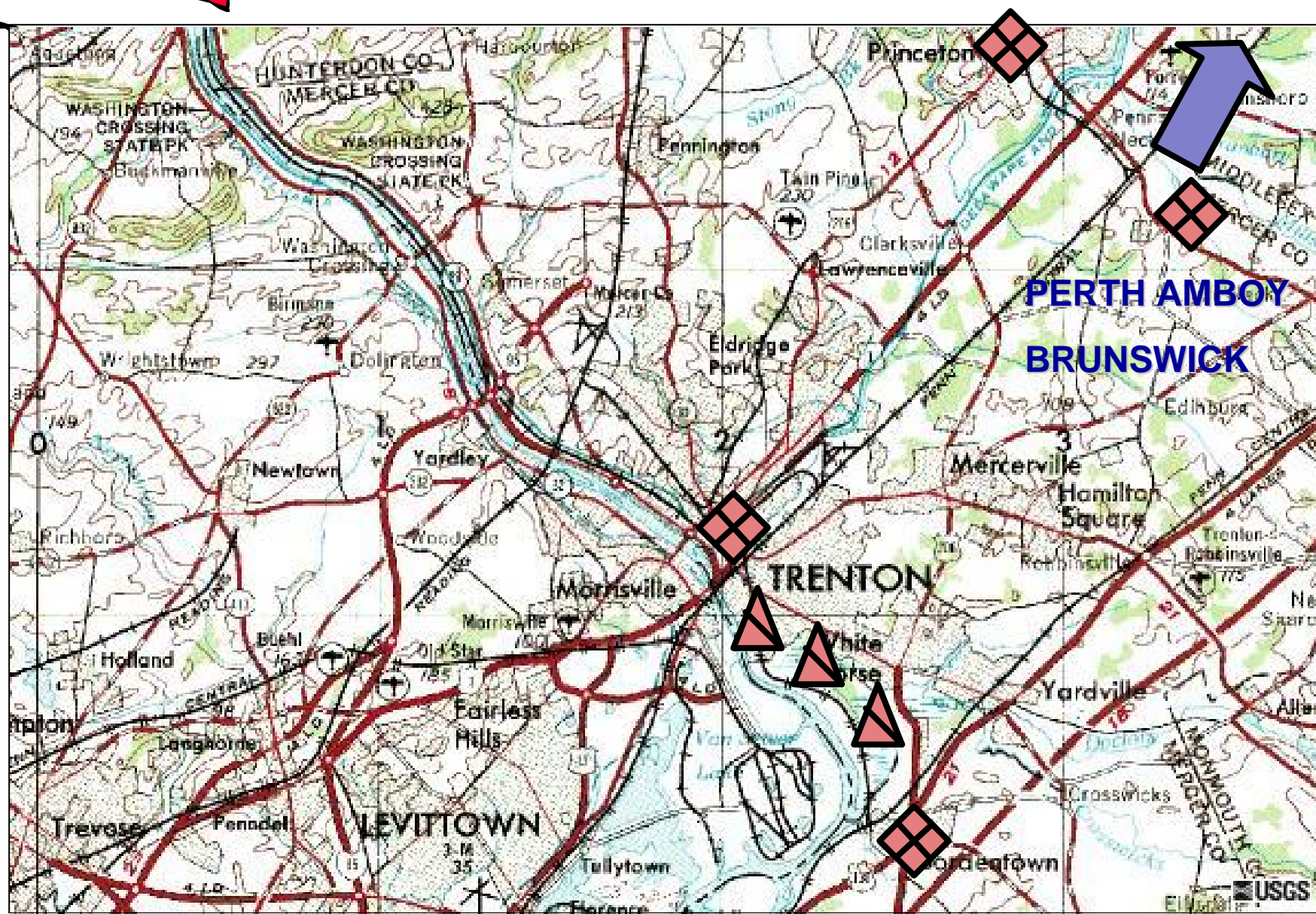
# BRITISH FORCES

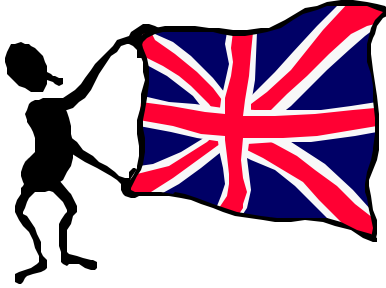






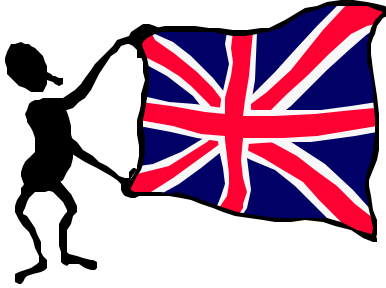
# ENEMY SITUATION





# ENEMY SITUATION

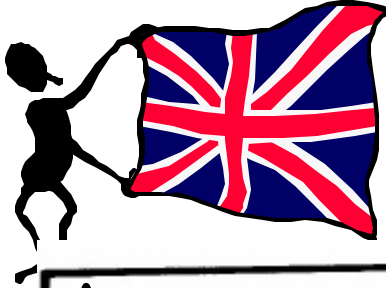
- **IN TRENTON**
  - Trenton furthest post south / Isolated.
  - Rall's Brigade suffered heaviest casualties at Ft Washington.
  - Feeling of invincibility throughout Trenton.
  - No boats or fortifications being built.
  - Expect no attack due to weather, perceived state of our army, Christmas season, and condition of river.
  - Christmas celebration ongoing.
  - Limited Patrolling.
  - 1 Escaped prisoner ability to compromise RAID.
    - No indication Yet.



# ENEMY SITUATION

- **FORCES IN TRENTON**
  - **Rall's Grenadiers (Blue uniforms faced with red).**
  - **Lossberg Fusilers (Red faced with white).**
  - **Knyphauser Fusilers (Black faced with silver).**
  - **Hessian Jagers (Green uniforms).**
  - **Troop British Light Dragoons.**
  - **6 / Three pound cannons.**

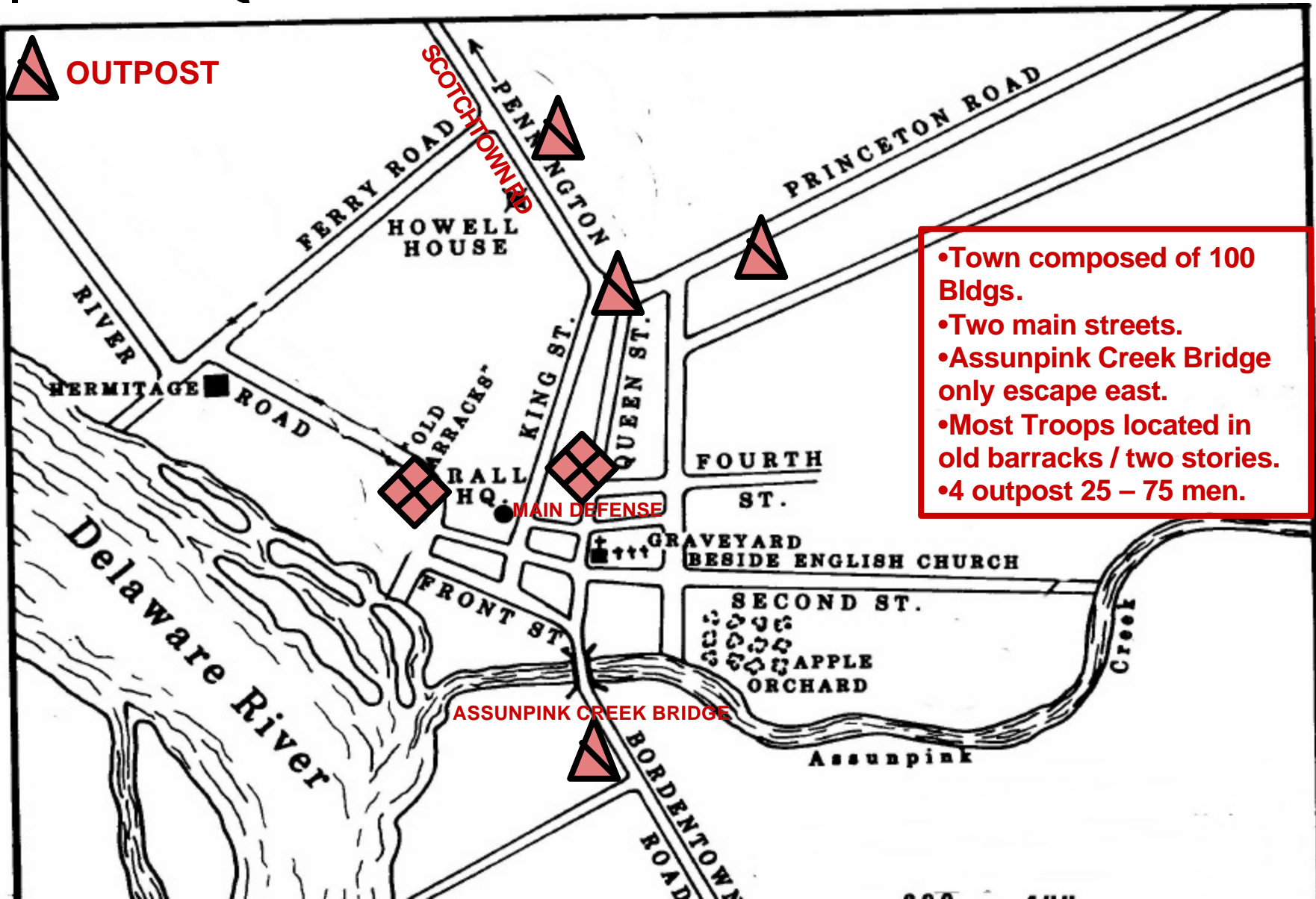
**1586 Men Total**



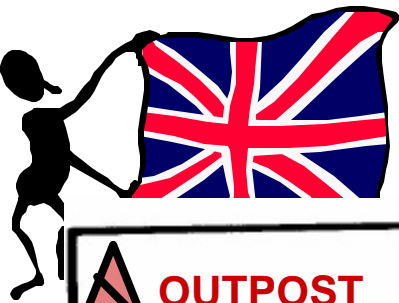
# ENEMY SITUATION

 **OUTPOST**

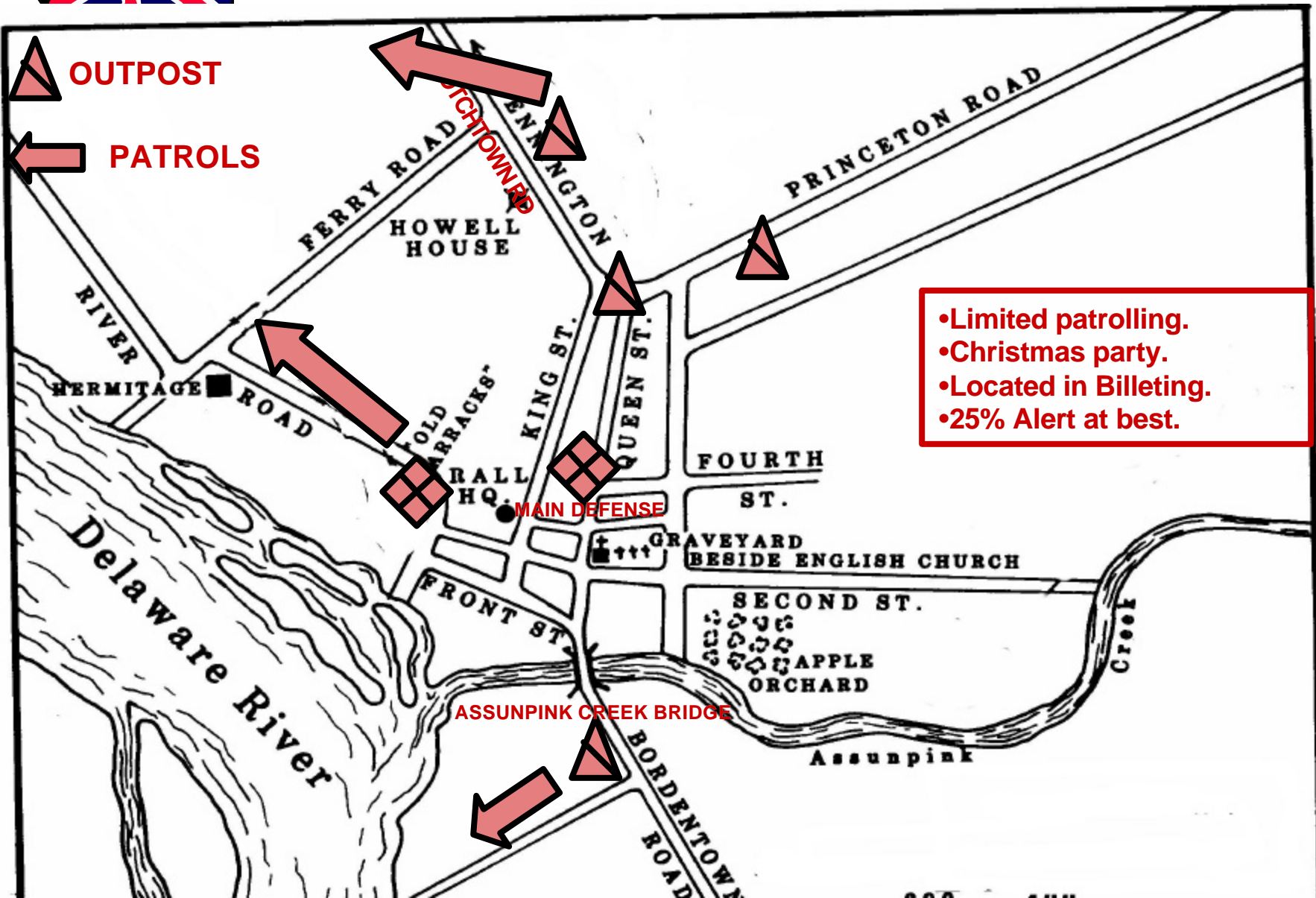
**SCOTCHTOWN**



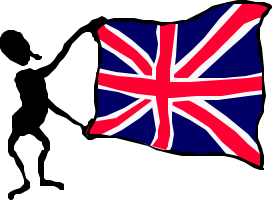
- Town composed of 100 Bldgs.
- Two main streets.
- Assunpink Creek Bridge only escape east.
- Most Troops located in old barracks / two stories.
- 4 outpost 25 – 75 men.



# MOST LIKELY COA







# **MOST DANGEROUS COA**

- **Delaware River freezes and Howe decides to attack.**
- **British position artillery on banks across from McKonkey's ferry and decimate force as it crosses.**



# MISSION

**On 25 December 1776, Continental Army conducts amphibious night raid Vic Trenton, NJ IOT isolate and defeat enemy outposts within AO and provide Continental Army with decisive victory.**

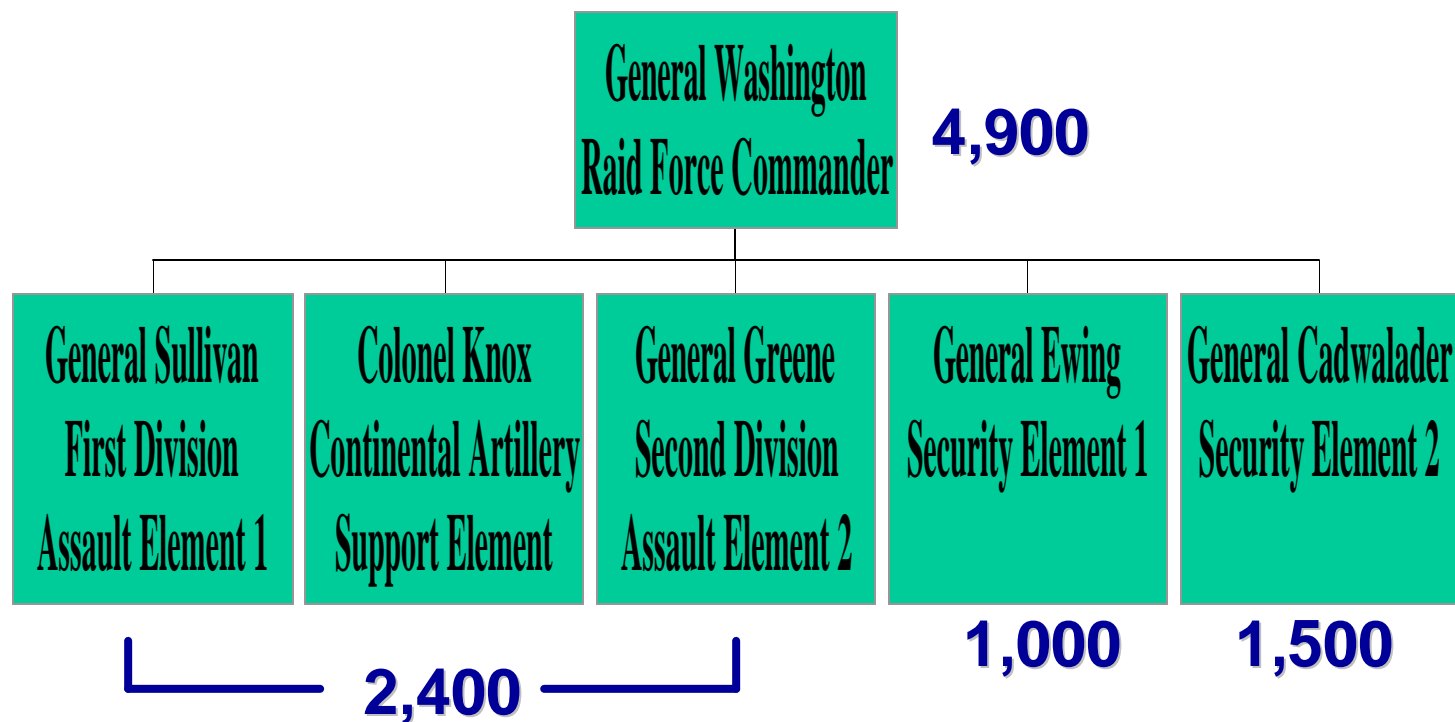
**BPT Continue the attack north to Brunswick, NJ.**

**Proposed H-Hour: 1800 / 25 December 1776**



# TASK ORGANIZATION

## RAID FORCE







# TASK ORGANIZATION

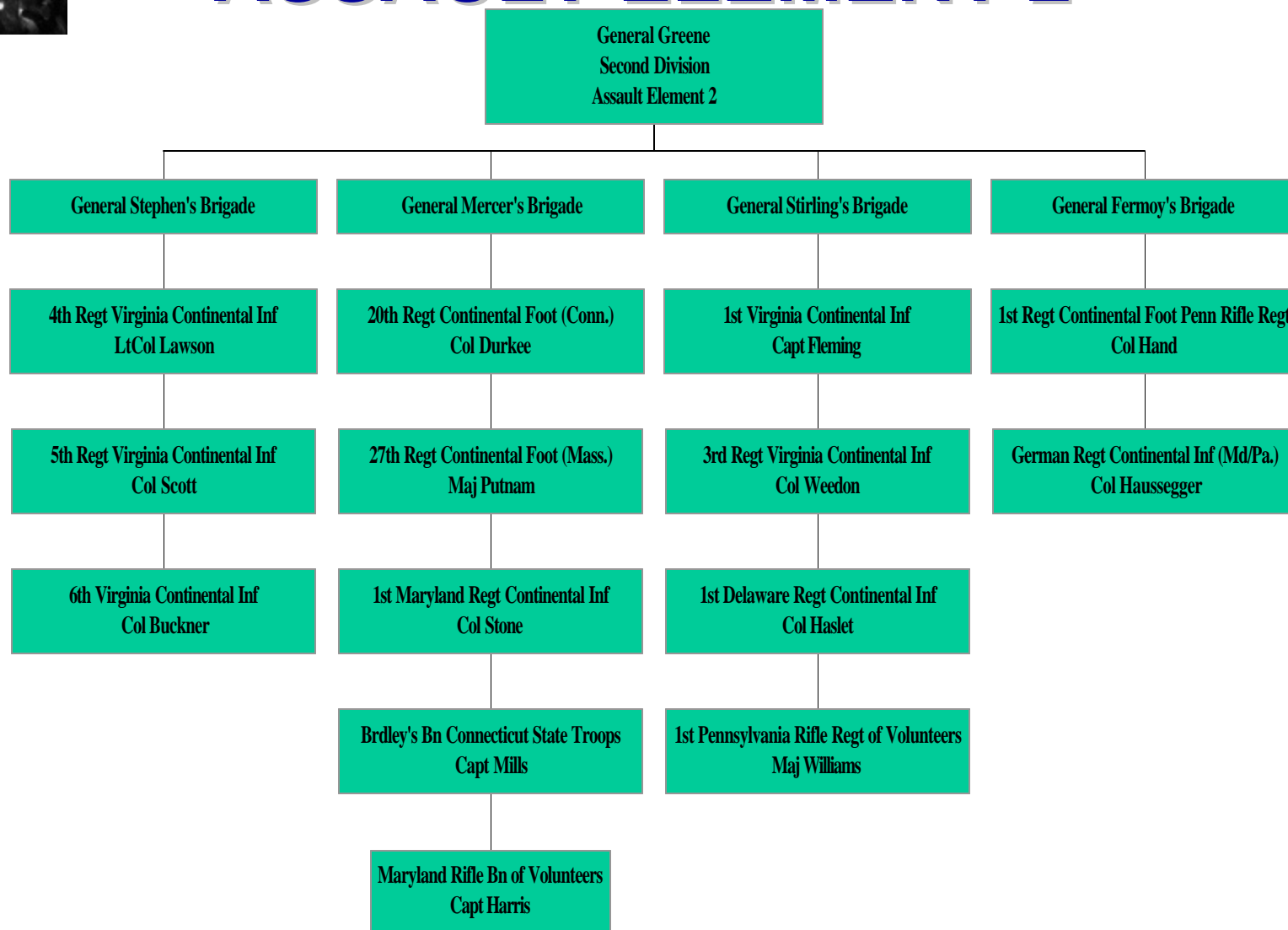
## ASSAULT ELEMENT 1





# TASK ORGANIZATION

## ASSAULT ELEMENT 2





# COMMANDERS INTENT

- **PURPOSE:**

- Isolate and defeat enemy outposts within AO and provide Continental Army with decisive victory.
- “Impress upon the mind of every man, from the lowest, the importance of the cause, and what it is we are contending for.”
  - **INDEPENDENCE**

**“VICTORY OR DEATH”**



# COMMANDERS INTENT

- **METHOD:**

- We will begin with the use of three crossing sites to deceive the enemy. We will conduct a night raid against Trenton using a two division simultaneous assault. We will block the enemy's ability to reinforce or escape. We will obtain surprise by assaulting from the north and south. We will use speed and tempo to gain and maintain the advantage while dispersing our artillery throughout the force to provide combined arms to all units. Once the enemy is defeated, we will use speed and the staged boats to withdrawal back across the Delaware River.



# COMMANDERS INTENT

- **ENDSTATE:**
  - I see a surprised and defeated enemy force in Trenton. I see battlefield experience gained. Officers have led by example and created a positive psychological impact of victory. I want the Raid to produce a Continental Army as an organized fighting force. I want them capable of conducting maneuver and maintaining the advantage on the battlefield; able to successfully wage even the most difficult of military operations. I see us back across the Delaware River as planned.



# CONCEPT OF OPERATIONS



# **CONCEPT OF OPERATIONS**

**PHASE I: Crossing of Delaware and Actions at BLS.**

**PHASE II: Movement to Objective.**

**PHASE III: Actions on Objective.**

**PHASE IV: Withdrawal from Objective.**

**PHASE V: Re-Crossing the Delaware.**





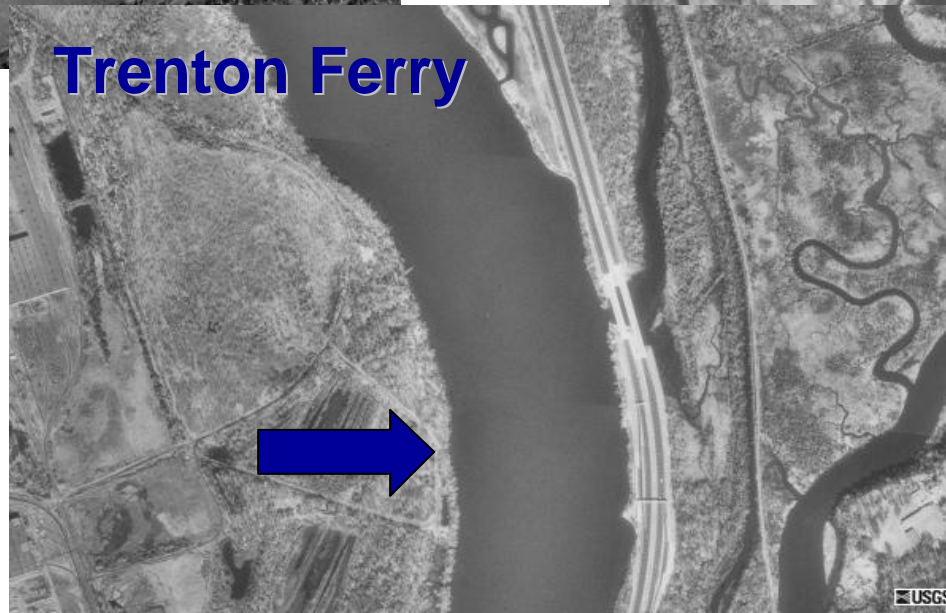
# CONCEPT OF OPERATIONS PHASE I



**Dunk's Ferry**



**McKonkey's Ferry**

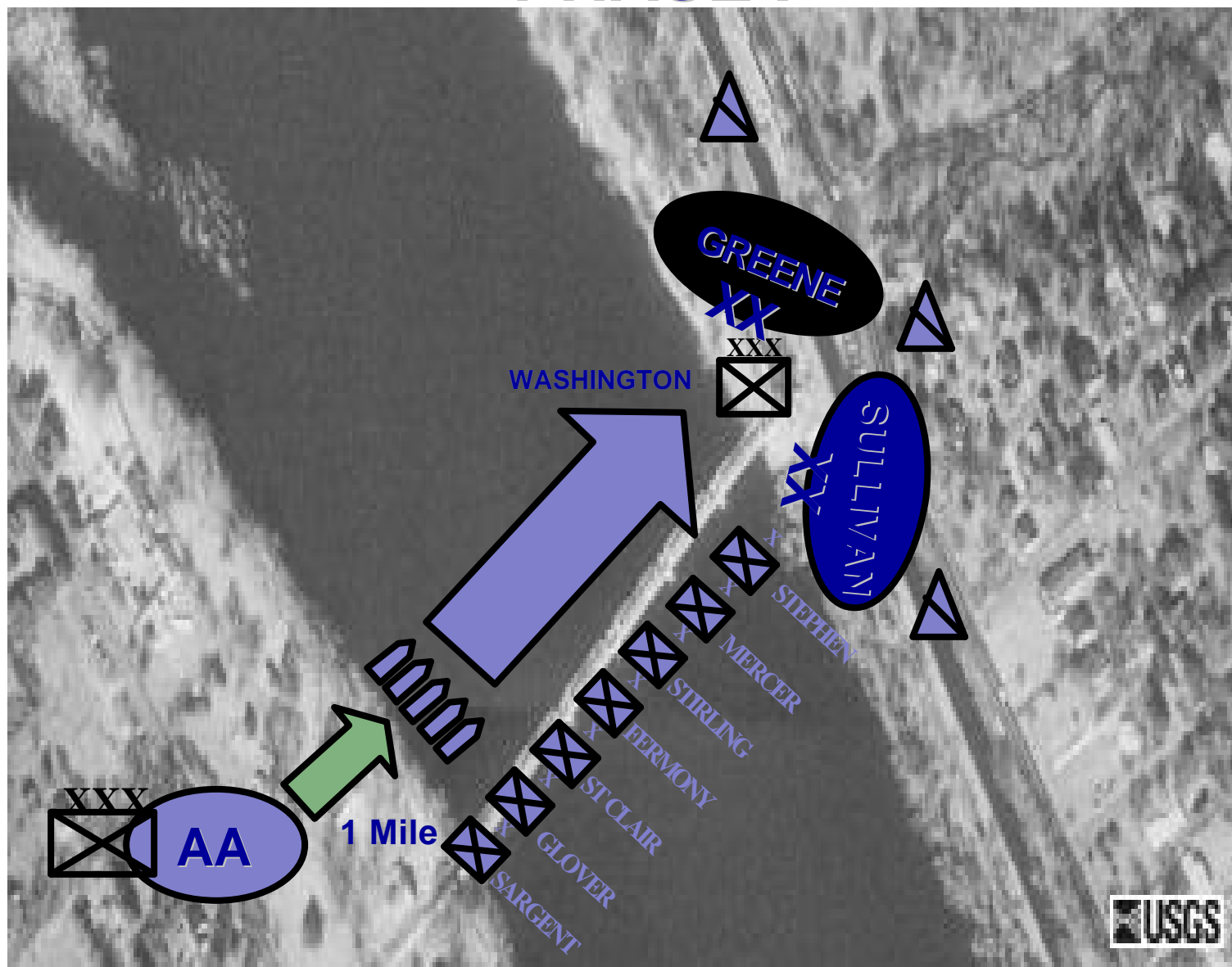


**Trenton Ferry**





# CONCEPT OF OPERATIONS PHASE I





# TASKS PHASE I

- **Assault Element 1 (Sullivan):** NLT 1800 conduct night river crossing at McKonkey's Ferry IOT position forces to make 9 mile movement to Trenton.
  - Provide coxswains for boat (Glover).
- **Assault Element 2 (Greene):** NLT 1800 conduct night river crossing at McKonkey's Ferry; secure BLS (Stephen) IOT position forces to make 9 mile movement to Trenton.
  - Leave security at BLS with boats.
- **Support Element (Knox):** GS of Raid Force. Provide four pieces of artillery to march at the head of each column; three pieces at the head of the second brigade of each column and two pieces in the back of the reserve.
  - Provide embarkation officer to organize and supervise loading of all boats (Knox).



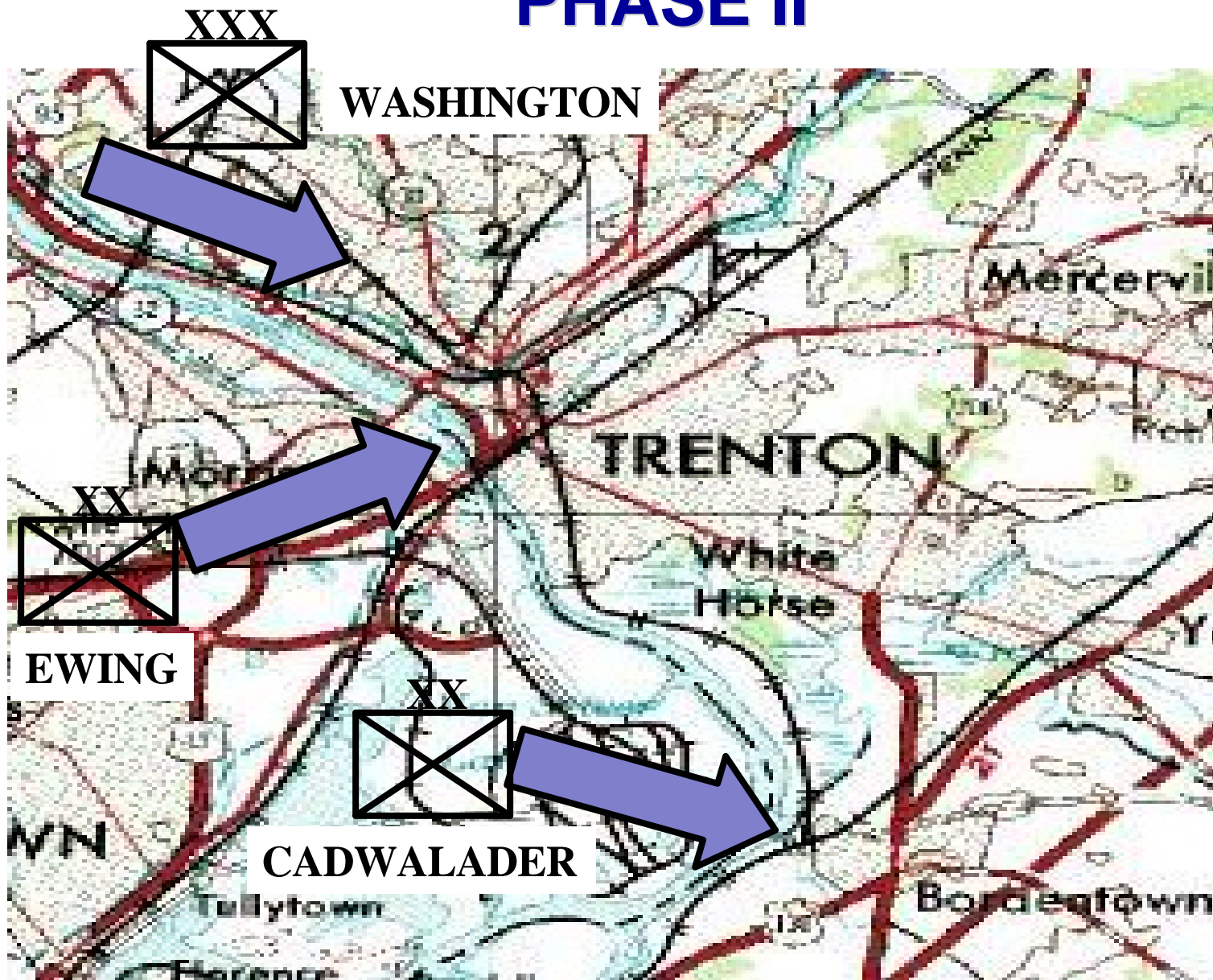
# TASKS

## PHASE I (CONT)

- **Support Element 1 (Ewing):** NLT 1800 conduct night river crossing vic Trenton Ferry IOT support ME.
- **Support Element 2 (Cadwalader):** NLT 1800 conduct night river crossing vic Dunk's Ferry IOT support ME.

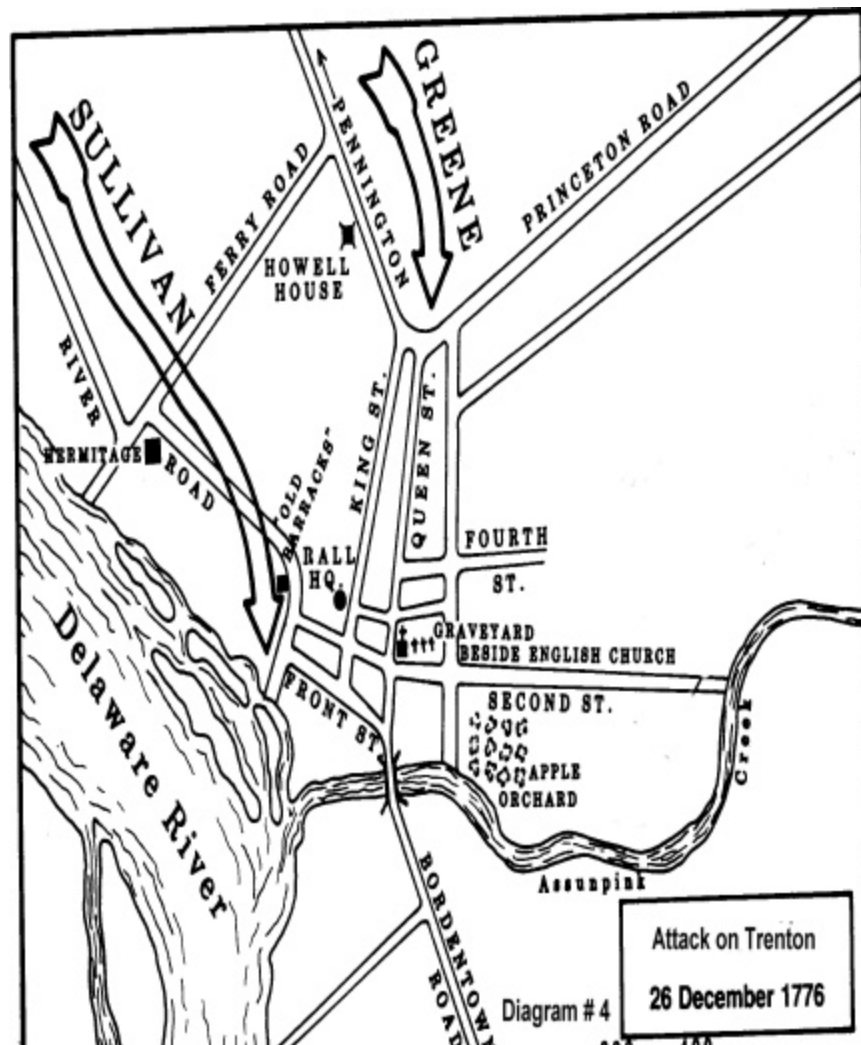
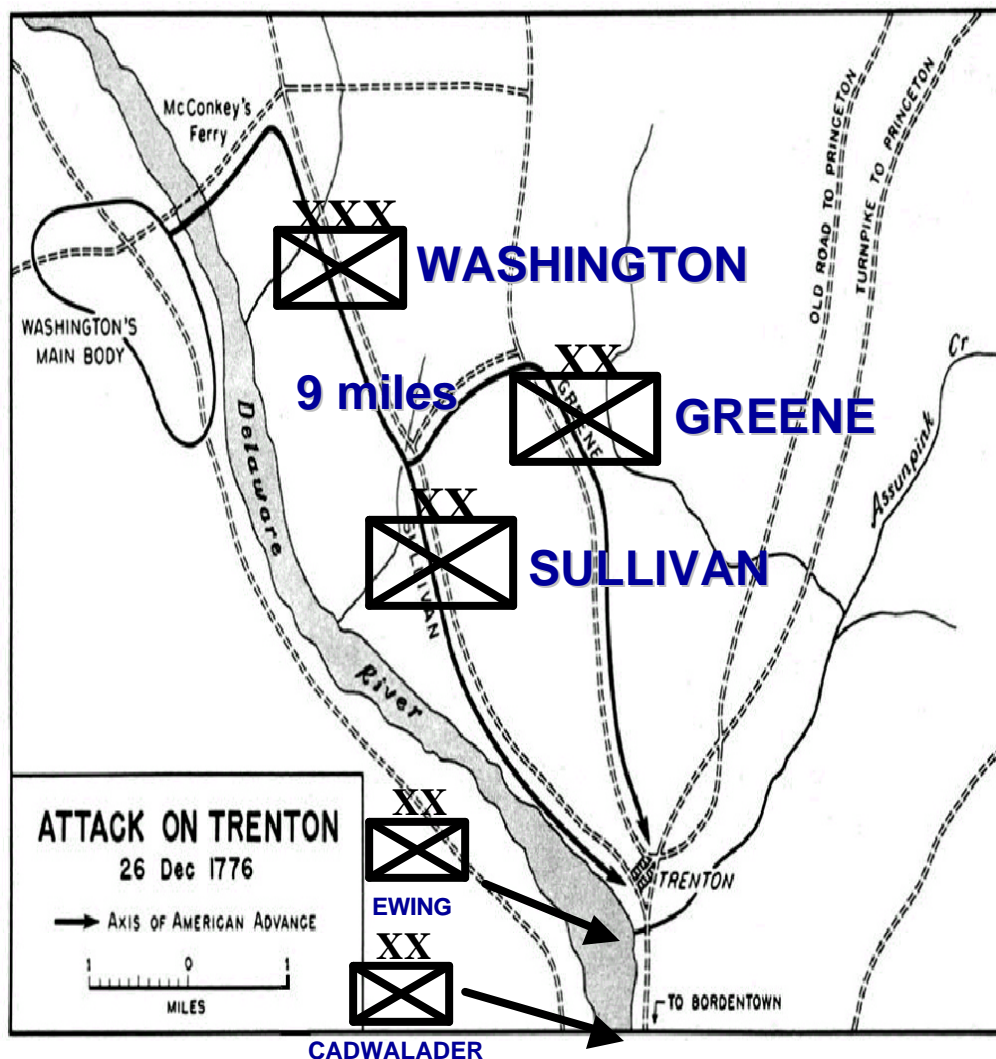


# CONCEPT OF OPERATIONS PHASE II





# CONCEPT OF OPERATIONS PHASE II





# TASKS

## PHASE II

- **Assault Element 1 (Sullivan):** O/O conduct movement to River Road vic Trenton; establish assault position IOT prepare for assault on Trenton.
  - Second of column.
  - Split from main body at Bear Tavern Road.
  - Provide flank security.
- **Assault Element 2 (Greene):** O/O conduct movement to Scotch Road vic Trenton; establish assault position IOT prepare for assault on Trenton.
  - Provide point security (Stephen).
  - Lead of column.
  - Split from main body at Bear Tavern Road.
  - Provide flank security.
- **Support Element (Knox):** GS of Raid Force.





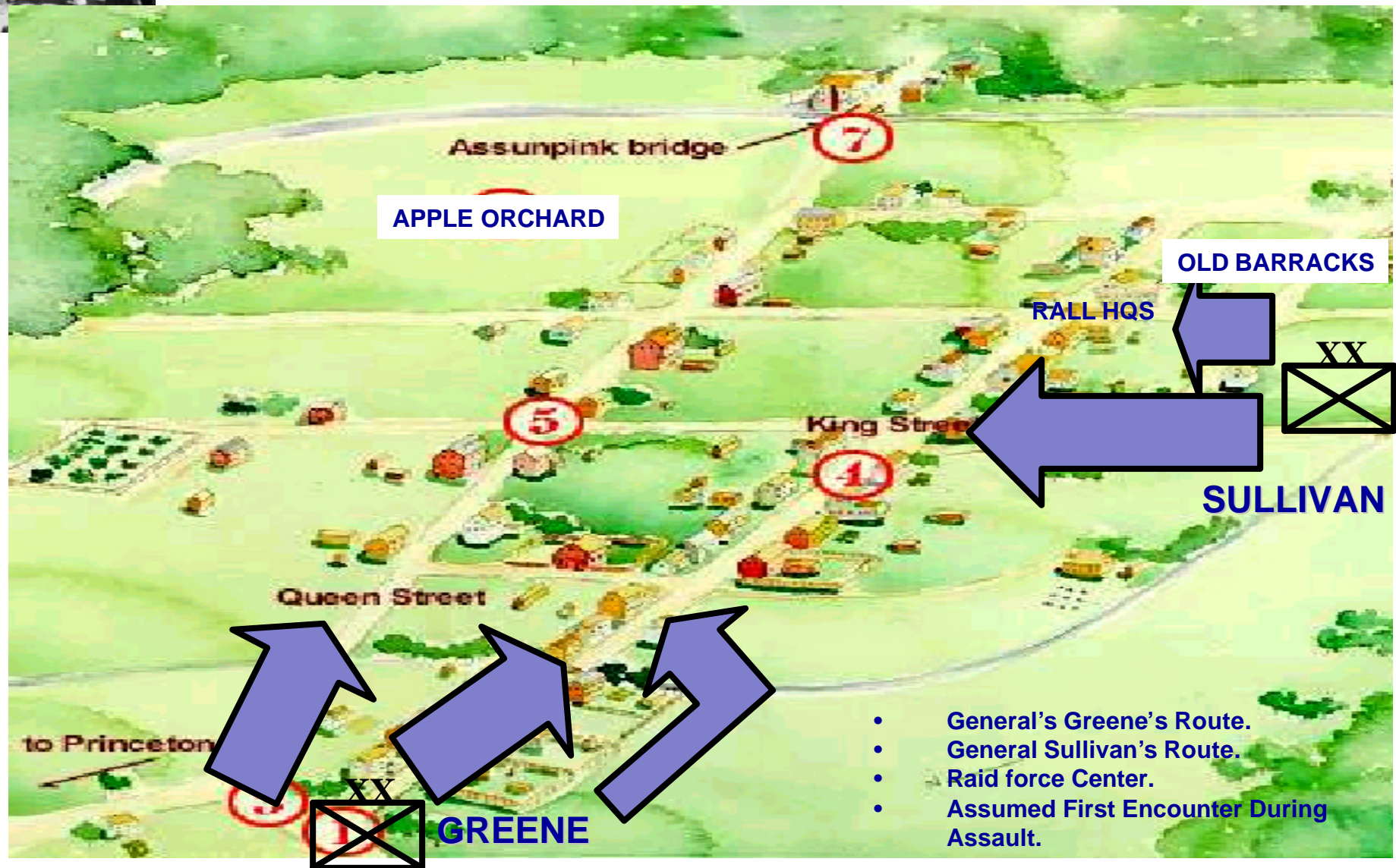
# TASKS

## PHASE II (CONT)

- **Support Element 1 (Ewing):** Establish positions vic Assunpink Bridge; block enemy forces IOT prevent reinforcement or escape from Trenton.
  - BPT reinforce Assault Force if necessary.
- **Support Element 2 (Cadwalader):** Conduct feint vic Bordentown IOT deceive enemy forces of Raid Force intentions.
  - Establish positions to block enemy forces vic Bordentown IOT prevent reinforcement of Trenton.
  - BPT attack to defeat enemy at Bordentown.



# CONCEPT OF OPERATIONS PHASE III







# TASKS

## PHASE III

- **Assault Element 1 (Sullivan):** NLT 0500 conduct night assault on western and southern portions of Trenton IOT defeat the enemy in zone.
  - BPT seize Assunpink Bridge IOT prevent enemy reinforcement or escape from Trenton (**Glover**).
  - BPT spike all enemy cannons.
- **Assault Element 2 (Greene):** NLT 0500 conduct night assault on north northwestern portions of Trenton IOT defeat the enemy in zone.
  - O/O establish position northeast of Trenton; block enemy penetration from Princeton IOT prevent enemy reinforcement or escape from Trenton (**Fermony**).
  - BPT spike all enemy cannons.
- **Support Element (Knox):** GS of Raid Force. Provide immediate fire support within the town of Trenton IOT support ME.
  - Grape Shot will be priority.



# TASKS

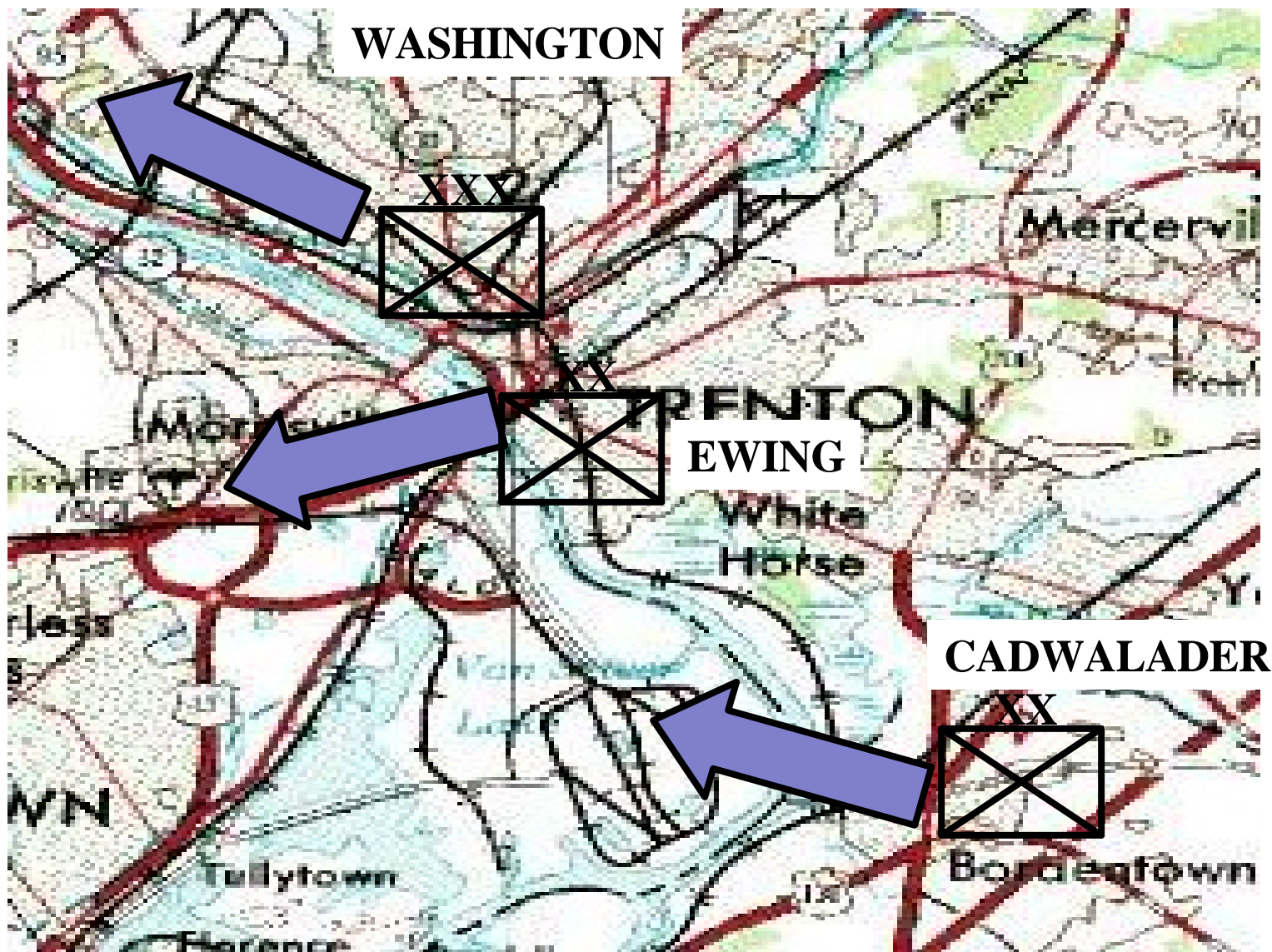
## PHASE III (CONT)

- **Support Element 1 (Ewing):** Establish positions vic Assunpink Bridge; block enemy forces IOT prevent reinforcement or escape from Trenton.
  - BPT reinforce Assault Force if necessary.
- **Support Element 2 (Cadwalader):** Conduct feint vic Bordentown IOT deceive enemy forces of Raid Force intentions.
  - Establish positions to block enemy forces vic Bordentown IOT prevent reinforcement of Trenton.
  - BPT attack to defeat enemy at Bordentown.



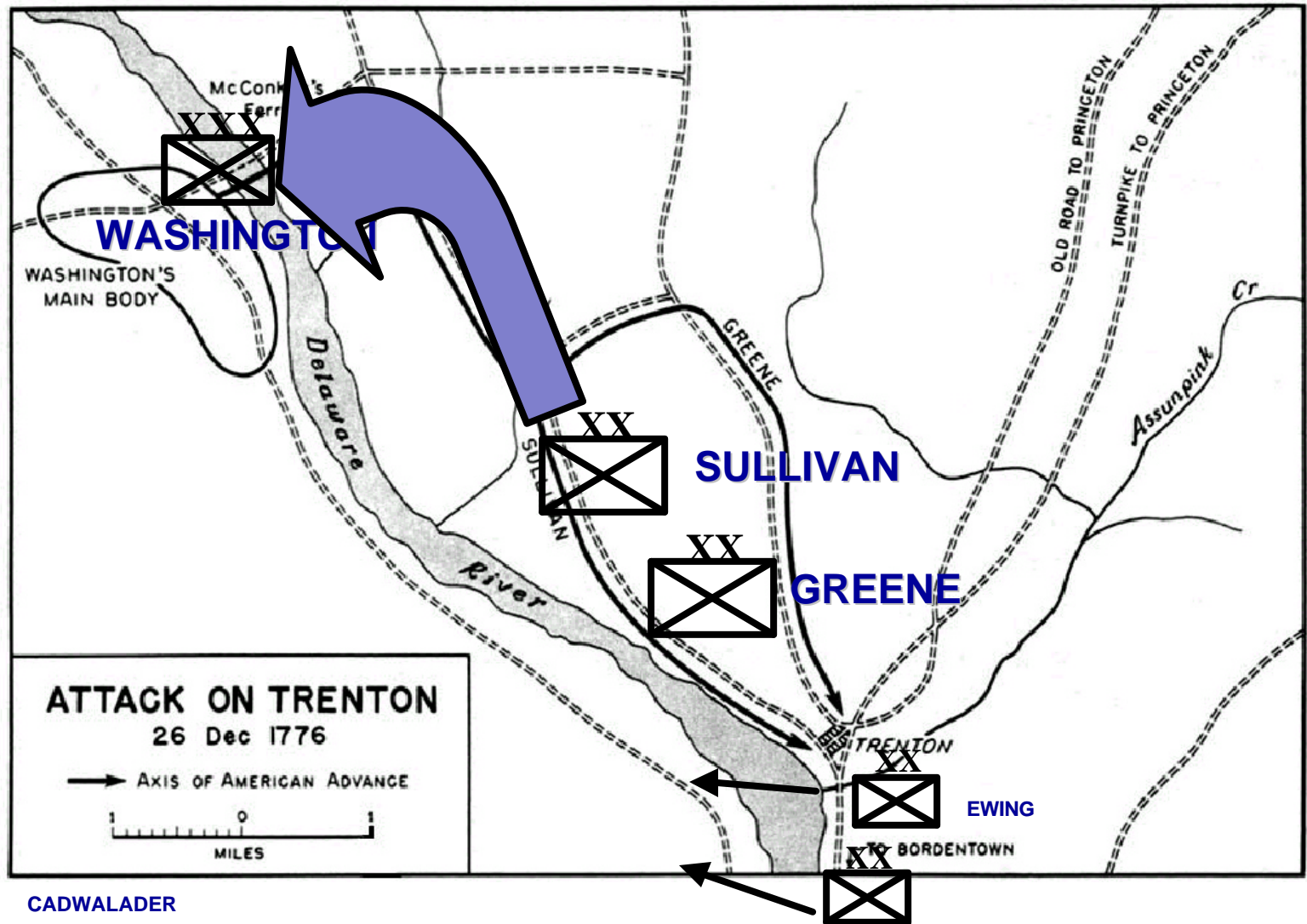
# CONCEPT OF OPERATIONS

## PHASE IV





# CONCEPT OF OPERATIONS PHASE IV



CADWALADER



# TASKS

## PHASE IV

- **Assault Element 1 (Sullivan):** O/O conduct withdrawal to Bear Tavern Road vic McKonkey's Ferry IOT prepare for river crossing.
  - Second of column.
  - Escort POWs.
  - Provide flank security.
- **Assault Element 2 (Greene):** O/O conduct withdrawal to Bear Creek Road vic McKonkey's Ferry IOT prepare for river crossing. Provide point security (Stephen).
  - Lead of column.
  - Provide flank security.
- **Support Element (Knox):** GS of Raid Force. O/O conduct withdrawal to Bear Creek Road vic McKonkey's Ferry IOT prepare for river crossing.
  - Bring back any usable enemy cannon.



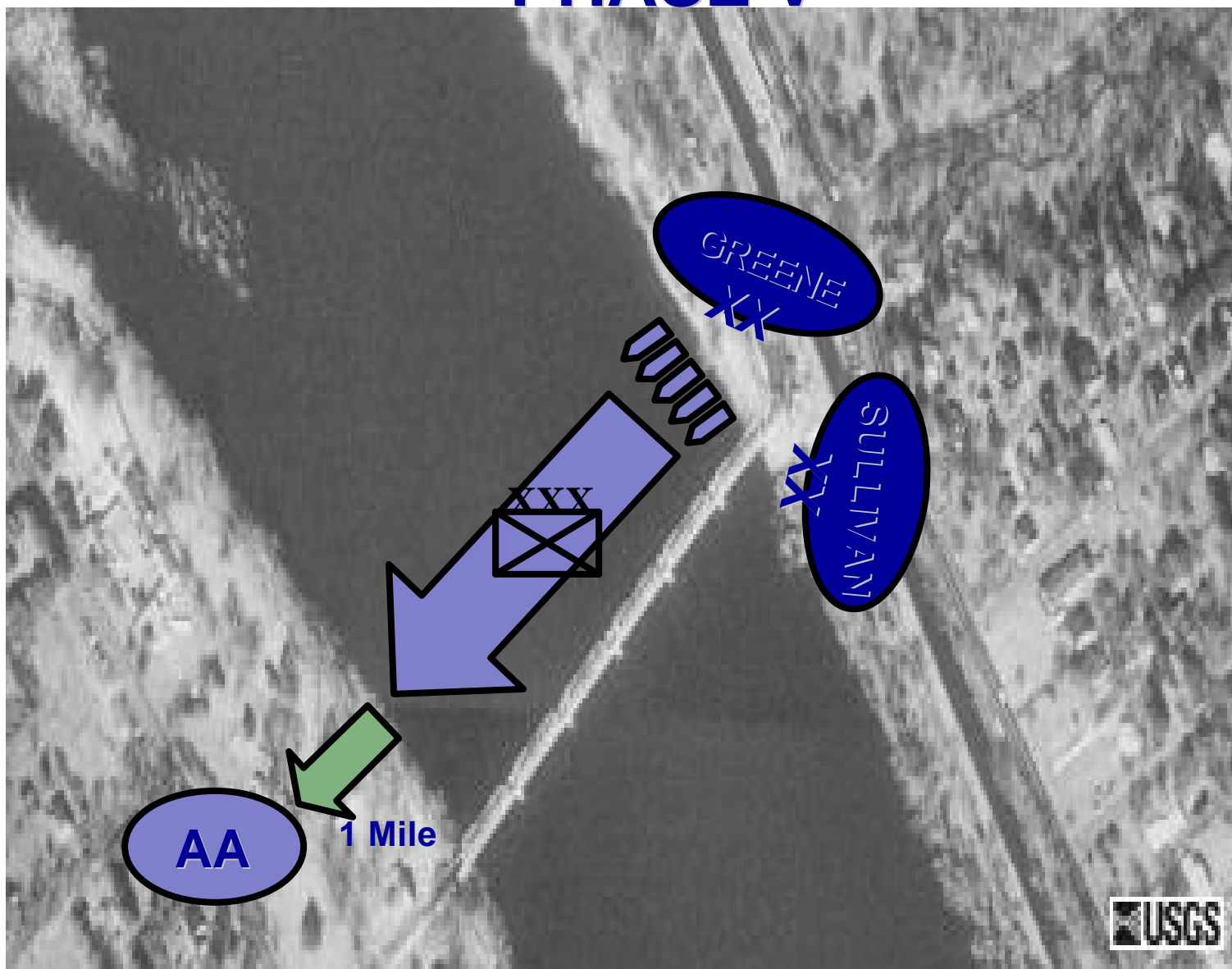
# TASKS

## PHASE IV (CONT)

- **Support Element 1 (Ewing):** Maintain positions vic Assunpink Bridge; block enemy forces IOT prevent reinforcement or escape from Trenton.
  - BPT reinforce Raid Force if necessary.
- **Support Element 2 (Cadwalader):** Maintain positions to block enemy forces vic Bordentown IOT prevent reinforcement during withdrawal.



# CONCEPT OF OPERATIONS PHASE V







# TASKS

## PHASE V

- **Assault Element 1 (Sullivan):** O/O conduct river crossing at McKonkey's Ferry IOT complete total victory for the Continental Army.
  - Provide coxswains for boat (Glover).
  - BPT block enemy reinforcements.
- **Assault Element 2 (Greene):** O/O conduct river crossing at McKonkey's Ferry; secure BLS (Stephen) IOT complete total victory for the Continental Army.
  - BPT to block enemy reinforcements.
- **Support Element (Knox):** GS of Raid Force. O/O conduct river crossing at McKonkey's Ferry IOT complete total victory for the Continental Army.
  - Provide embarkation officer to organize and supervise loading of all boats (Knox).





# TASKS

## PHASE V (CONT)

- **Support Element 1 (Ewing):** O/O conduct river crossing vic Trenton Ferry IOT complete total victory for the Continental Army.
- **Support Element 2 (Cadwalader):** O/O conduct river crossing vic Dunk's Ferry IOT complete total victory for the Continental Army.



# **TIMELINE**

- **1400 Move to Assembly Area.**
- **1600 Begin Loading Boats.**
- **1800 First Boats Launch.**
- **2400 All Units Across Delaware River.**
- **0100 Commence Movement to Objective.**
- **0500 Commence Action on Objective.**
- **1000 Complete Actions on Objective.**
- **1200 Movement to BLS.**
- **1700 All Units Back Across Delaware River.**
- **TBD Mission Complete.**



# COORDINATING INSTRUCTIONS

- **H-Hour is 1800.**
- **Twice as many rifles will be taken then muskets.**
- **Strict adherence to OPSEC must be maintained.**
- **Grape Shot will be primary artillery ammunition.**
- **Each man will carry rations, 40 rounds ammunition, water, and bayonets.**
- **Powder must be kept dry under all circumstances.**



# QUESTIONS

